

PLUCK AND LUCK

COMPLETE
STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

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Price 5 Cents.

STILL ALARM SAM, THE DARING BOY FIREMAN; OR, SURE TO BE ON HAND.

BY EX-FIRE CHIEF WARDEN.



There, with her back to the frame of the loom, stood a young girl. She could not move, for her body was bound with ropes to the loom. A clumsy gag was in her mouth.

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CHAPTER I.

THE WORK OF THE INCENDIARY.

Clickety-click-click!

In an instant Sam Weldon, the young foreman of Hook and Ladder Company No. 6, was wide awake. The unmistakable stroke of the telegraphic alarm had aroused him as by instinct from a deep sleep.

Whizz! Whirr! Boom!

That was the still alarm gong, and Sam was out of his bunk in a twinkling. The lantern hung against the alarm dial, and showed the number of the box where the fire was located. It was No. 60.

"On the west side!" cried Sam, with a thrill. "I'll bet it's the Sinclair Mills. All on deck, boys—lively, there!"

He struck the big gong several hard raps, which made a noise sufficient to arouse the dozen hard sleepers on the floor above. They instantly sprang up, with their clothes all on, and came sliding down the pole to the floor.

"What is it?"

"Where's the fire, Sam?"

"What's the box?"

These were the queries aimed at Sam, and he shouted:

"Box No. 60. It's probably the Sinclair Mills. You can see the rest."

"Bud Ross, the incendiary!" was the unanimous cry. "It is the incendiary's work beyond a doubt."

There was no time, however, for speculation or for surmises. Sam Weldon now proceeded to illustrate in a forcible and effective manner his abilities as a fire chief. In a twinkling the long ropes were run out into the street, the twelve permanent men seized hold of them, and away went Hook and Ladder No. 6 for the scene of disaster.

It was a still alarm, and there was no time to call in the extra men or volunteers, who generally responded when a general alarm was sounded.

The little town of Norton boasted of one of the best fire departments in the whole country. The town had been reduced to ashes twice before the people awoke to the prime necessity of an adequate department.

Then hook and ladder trucks and engines were procured.

Volunteers were plenty, and for a time the general alarm was deemed sufficient as a means of calling the fireman to their post of duty.

But within a few months Norton had been cursed with an incendiary gang, and fires became so numerous and disastrous that Morton Sinclair had deemed it imperative to maintain for a time at least a permanent fire company, and accordingly twelve able men were placed in constant service upon Fire Company 6, consisting of a hook and ladder truck, and a hose wagon and engine of full power.

These permanent men were paid by private subscription, raised by the prominent business men of the town. So great was the incendiary scare in Norton that the most thorough precautions were found necessary. Detectives were on the track of the incendiary gang, but could get no clew whatever.

A system of telegraphic signals between the mills and the engine houses had been adopted by Mr. Sinclair. These consti-

tuted the still alarm, which enabled the fire companies to make a quicker start for the scene of the fire, a general alarm being rung afterwards.

The young chief of Hook and Ladder No. 6 would have been judged by a stranger as far too young for his position.

But Sam Weldon, though a boy in years, was, nevertheless, a man in action and bravery, and had so signally distinguished himself in the performance of his duties that he had become famous and popular, and had won the sobriquet of Still Alarm Sam.

At every fire Still Alarm Sam was identified by a frenzied crowd of admirers, for he was sure to achieve some marvelous deed of bravery. Sure to be on hand, first of all, no wonder that his efforts were recognized, and he became famous!

Sam was of an athletic build, though light in weight, and possessed of a clear, handsome face, betokening in its every line character and resolution. Such was a fireman by nature, having from early years frequented the engine houses, his father having once been famous as a fire chief in the great city of New York.

But Sam had been left an orphan at a tender age, and since his mother's death had been compelled to shift for himself. He made a living in turn as errand boy, newsboy, store clerk, and finally reached his favorite vocation by securing a berth as a fireman. He rapidly rose to the position of Chief of No. 6.

Down the street like a meteor ran the crack fire company of Norton.

Sam Weldon was in the van, with his trumpet in one hand and his other hand gripping the extreme end of the rope. There was not a man in Norton who could keep pace with Still Alarm Sam in running to a fire.

As they ran on, the western sky seemed all aglow with a powerful light.

"I told you so, boys!" cried Sam wildly. "It is the Sinclair Mills."

"We'll get there!" cried one of the fireboys.

A cheer went up, and on they dashed. The clatter of the wheels over the stone pavings, the jangling of the bell at the forepeak aroused the people, and they came rushing to windows and doors in wild excitement.

The streets, deserted but a few moments previous, became alive with excited crowds. In the category of exciting events, there is nothing which can so quickly collect a crowd as a fire.

Already the mills were in sight. They were a noble line of brick buildings along the river bank. Flames and smoke were pouring from the upper stories.

Sam Weldon and his brave boys were, as usual, the very first on the scene. In fact, a line of hose had been laid to the river, and an engine manned before the rabble reached the spot.

Then came the other fire companies and the volunteers in hot haste. Sam had ladders run up, and lines of hose were carried to the roof.

Under his able generalship, the battle with King Flame had begun. Several streams of water were now pouring upon the fire. As one gang of men fell back exhausted from the force-pumps, another took its place.

In the very thickest of the smoke and flame Still Alarm Sam was conspicuous.

Once, having occasion to descend to the ground, his arm was seized by a tall, elderly man clad in the finest of broad-cloth, and whose pallid face was of a patrician cast.

"Sam Weldon, if you save my mills to-night I will forever be in your debt."

"Mr. Sinclair!" gasped Sam.

"Can you do it, my boy?" cried the millionaire, with feverish eagerness.

"I think we can," replied Sam steadily.

"God bless you! One question?"

"Well?"

"Do you think it's the work of that villainous incendiary, Ross?"

"I am not prepared to say," replied Sam candidly. "It is more than likely, however, that Bud Ross is the instrument. We can tell better after the excitement is over."

"True. Heaven bless you, my brave boy! I shall never forget you!"

Sam went up the ladder once more like a monkey. But he never reached the edge of the roof.

Two men were above him on the same ladder. They were carrying a line of hose through a window. Sam had reached a point just beneath them when there came a sickening, comprehensive crash.

The ladder had crashed in against the wall. One of the men above Sam clung to the edge of a window ledge. The other, being higher up, had a grip on the eaves. This one drew himself up to the roof, and the other clambered safely into the window.

But Sam was thrown from the ladder with force. He felt himself falling, but was powerless to save himself.

A fearful, wild, horrified cry went up from the crowd.

It seemed as if their hero was going down to his death. Heavens! What an awful drop that was!

Down, down Sam Weldon shot like a stone out of a catapult. Down, and only one thing saved his life.

Had he struck the stone pavings he would surely have been frightfully mangled!

But, as chance had it, just beneath him was a deep bulkhead, protected by light-glass sashes. At the bottom of this bulkhead were bales of cotton waiting to be lifted on an elevator into the outer air.

Sam's body struck the sash and crashed through it. He fell with some force upon the cotton bales, and his body rebounding crashed through a glass-door into the mill basement.

In striking the yielding glass sash Sam's fall was considerably broken, and the soft cotton bales were the easiest sort of a cushion he could have alighted upon. By what was certainly a marvelous bit of good fortune, he had escaped a frightful death.

For beyond a shaking up and a momentary stunned sensation, with a few slight bruises, he was practically uninjured. He was quickly upon his feet.

The basement in which he now found himself was very dark, and he could not see a single object about him.

But there was a dull glare of light in the direction of the window by which he had entered the basement.

Sam started for this, when suddenly he heard a smothered cry at his right. Then the gloom was dispelled by a fierce bright stream of light right into his eyes, and which dazzled him for a moment.

Then a harsh voice exclaimed:

"Who is he, Bud?"

"Sh! you fool! Don't call names here. Ah! by the great fiends! It's that young fire fighter, Still Alarm Sam. Here's luck! Don't let him escape, pard."

The light went out in an instant.

It required no further explanation for Sam to understand all. The light was a dark lantern in the hands of Bud Ross,

the leader of the notorious incendiary gang which had for so long terrorized the town.

How many of the ruffians there were Sam had no means of knowing; but he instantly realized that his life was in deadly peril.

That they would murder him in the place and let the flames conceal their crime he had no doubt. It was natural, then, that he should seek to beat a retreat.

"Stand aside!" he shouted defiantly. "Dare not lay hands upon me!"

"Kill him!" hissed a savage voice. "Give it to him, pard!"

Sam parried a deadly blow aimed at his head. He could not see his assailants so was not guided much in his defense.

But he struck out at random, and felled one of the villains. The next moment he was seized in a powerful embrace.

A struggle, hardly with a parallel for desperation and ferocity then ensued, and around the basement Sam whirled in the deadly wrestle with his foe.

CHAPTER II.

A TIMELY RESCUE.

As Sam was now in the embrace of only one man, and no other seemed to come to his antagonist's aid, he concluded that the incendiaries were but two in number, and the one he had felled was yet unconscious.

The man with whom he was grappling was a powerful fellow, however, and considerably more than a match for Sam in a physical way.

But, although slight of frame, Sam was a wonderfully agile and athletic youth.

His quickness more than made up for the difference in physical strength, and he soon had his foe at a disadvantage.

He threw him heavily, and planting a knee upon his chest held him firmly.

"Ha!" he cried, triumphantly. "I know you, Bud Ross. You are my prisoner. Yield, or I will shut off your miserable breath forever."

Sam's hand was at the villain's throat, and Ross could not resist. He raved and spluttered in vain.

"Curse ye, pard, why don't ye come to my help?" he yelled to his companion. "I'll bet the cowardly dog has skipped. I say, young feller, let up on my breathing gear."

"I'll shut it off entirely if you don't surrender peaceably," cried Sam resolutely.

"You will?"

"Yes."

"What good will that do ye?"

"It will do the world lots of good, for it will then be rid of a monster."

Ross gave expression to a volley of curses; but his partner did not come to his help, though Sam fancied that he heard him recovering his senses.

Realizing that action must be quickly made, Sam lifted his voice and shouted lustily for help.

All the incidents described had transpired in a very brief space of time.

Sam's fall had been seen by the whole crowd, and they were not slow in sending a searching party after him. These were now just entering the basement, and Ross, the incendiary, heard them coming.

He had no idea of yielding, for he knew that capture meant State's prison for life. Sam's grip tightened on the villain's windpipe, for he knew that he would make a fresh and desperate attempt to escape.

"Curse ye, let me up!" howled the incendiary savagely. "Why don't ye come and help me, partner?"

"Coming," growled the fallen villain, who had just regained his senses. "I'll be confounded if I don't feel dizzy. That was a right sharp clip I got on the head. Where are you, Bud?"

"Here—er—er—help!" spluttered the villain, as Sam's grip tightened on his windpipe. The young fireman glanced anxiously at the basement window. He heard his friends lowering a ladder. Would they never come?

Certainly not in time. Sam realized this as he heard the other incendiary behind him. Knowing the danger of his position, he dared not risk it further, and was compelled to relax his hold upon Ross and spring up.

He turned to grapple with the incendiary's partner, when a lantern's light flashed into the cellar, and two of the fire boys sprang down.

But before Sam could get a hold upon either one of the incendiaries, they had made a bolt into the gloom, and were lost to view.

Sam, covered with blood, and bruised in a dozen spots, was revealed to the two red-shirted comrades who had descended to his rescue.

"Sam Weldon!" gasped one of them. "Are you badly hurt?"

"No," replied Sam excitedly; "but come with me, quick. Don't let them escape!"

"Escape?" exclaimed one of the firemen. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I've just had a tussle with a couple of the incendiaries, one of whom is Bud Ross."

The fire boys were electrified; but Sam's explanation, though brief, was sufficient, and a search of the basement was instantly begun.

By the light of the lantern, every nook and corner was explored. No signs of the villains could be discovered, however, and Sam was deeply disappointed, when the search suddenly brought them to the foot of a flight of stairs.

These, Sam reasoned, must lead into the upper mill, and up them they sprang. The young fireman's hopes revived, for he felt sure that they would succeed in capturing the incendiaries yet.

All this while, which, however, was but a brief time, the fire had been giving the fire boys a hard fight. It seemed for a time almost impossible to get it under control.

Springing up the stair, Sam came to the first or ground floor of the mill. Here objects were visible, for the light from the street and the yard illumined the interior as bright as day.

Looms and machines of all sorts extended for a long distance on this floor. Sam would have made a thorough search, but this proved to be not necessary.

For at that moment a shadowy form was seen to flit to the foot of a second stairway. Sam and his comrades instantly gave chase.

"Hurrah!" cried one of the fire boys. "We're sure to catch 'em! We'll chase 'em to the top of the mill to do it, too!"

"If they go much higher the fire will stop them."

Thrilled with prospects of catching the firebugs, Sam led the way to the stairs with intrepid manner. Before he reached the landing the crack of a revolver mingled with the thunder of the flames.

Fortunately the bullet went wide. The next moment Sam reached the landing.

But here he was again doomed to failure. Darkness was upon this floor, and the smoke was quite thick. The firebugs vanished, and nothing more was seen or heard of them. The most assiduous search failed in discovering the least trace of them. They had mysteriously disappeared. The search was at an end.

But Still Alarm Sam was not satisfied. He fancied that the

villains had fled to an upper story. His companions endeavored to dissuade him from going up there.

"It ain't likely they're up there, Sam. They couldn't live there a minute. If you go up you'll only throw away your life."

Sam Weldon never was able to explain the strange motive which impelled him to visit that upper floor.

He knew that the flames had driven the hosemen from there, and that it would be risking his life to venture the feat.

But his was a daring spirit.

"I tell you I am going up there," he declared. "I want to be satisfied whether Ross has gone up there to commit suicide or not."

So the intrepid young fireman sprang up the stairs leading to the upper story. He quickly vanished from view.

Up through a vast cloud of stifling smoke Sam went. Reaching the landing, he felt firm floor under his feet.

He rightly guessed that the fire was not in the immediate vicinity of the stairway, although the smoke might have led one to think so. It was easy to locate the direction in which the smoke was being carried, and he followed up the draught, in the meanwhile protecting his throat and lungs with his coat used as a muffler.

The smoke grew less dense as he advanced, and soon he was able to see his way before him. He was in a part of the mill which was well illumined by the flames, though not in their immediate vicinity.

Looms in a long line were before him, and Sam began to look for some sign of his birds. It was while thus employed that he made a fearful discovery.

Suddenly a cloud of smoke before him was dispelled by a gust of air, and he saw a heavy loom just before him. Against it was an object, the sight of which caused Sam's blood to turn to icy coldness and his heart to leap into his mouth.

There, with her back to the iron frame of the loom, stood a young girl. She could not move, for her body was bound with ropes to the loom.

She could not speak, for a clumsy gag was in her mouth. Horror of horrors! What diabolical, fiendish deed was this? It was certainly murder intended.

With a gasping cry of horror, Sam regarded the young girl. Her pallid face and wild, dilated eyeballs betokened her awful terror and suffering.

Sam saw that she was young and very beautiful. But what did it mean? Why was she tied to the loom to perish thus? Who had done this hellish deed?

But it was of no use to ask her now. She could not reply. Sam advanced quickly, and removed the gag from her mouth.

Then he exclaimed:

"My God! What is this? How came you here?"

For a moment the young girl seemed too overcome with weakness to reply; but as Sam supported her she managed to say:

"I was tied to this loom by two men, whom I do not know."

"Two men unknown to you?"

"Yes."

"But how did you come here? Did they bring you here at this hour of the night?" asked Sam.

"I came here to see my father, who is the watchman of the mill," she replied. "His name is Hiram Bates. I am Agnes Bates, and I work in this mill."

"Ah!" exclaimed Sam, with interest.

"Usually my father is at the lower gate to meet me every night when I bring him his lunch. But to-night he was not there. Just as I stepped into the yard two men seized me and brought me up here. They tied me to this loom, and no doubt meant to leave me here to burn to death."

"Monstrous deed!" exclaimed Sam, with horror. "Did you know the men?"

"No."

"Did you see their faces?"

"They were masked."

"And your father——"

A wail of anguish escaped the girl's lips.

"Oh, I fear that he is dead!" she moaned. "I know they have killed him!"

"It may not be so," cried Sam cheerfully. "Have courage, my young woman. No harm shall come to you if I can avert it."

"You are kind!" she cried gratefully. "You are a fireman, are you not?"

"Yes."

"You came just in time to save me. Is not the smoke growing thicker?"

"You are right!" cried Still Alarm Sam. "There is no time to lose, if we would get out of here alive!"

Sam mentally accepted what he believed was a correct solution of the mystery. The incendiaries had, no doubt, in some manner silenced the mill watchman, Hiram Bates.

Then they had been surprised by the coming of Agnes. Fearful that she would suspect something, and give the alarm, they had entrapped her and left her in the upper room to perish.

It was a frightful deed of inhumanity; but Sam Weldon had arrived just in time to prevent the consummation of what would certainly have been a fearful tragedy. Yet they were now threatened with what seemed an inevitable and not to be averted fate.

The flames had reached the stairway, and as Sam, with Agnes Bates by his side, attempted to descend, he was driven back by their furious volume.

CHAPTER III.

A DASTARDLY SHOT.

With this, the only seemingly possible means of egress from the upper story of the burning mill, thus cut off by the flames, the situation was a desperate one, indeed.

Still Alarm Sam never more fully in his life realized how near to death he was. Its very jaws were yawning over him.

A cry of terror escaped the young girl's lips, and she recoiled as the burst of flame came up the stairway.

"Is there no other way to descend?" cried Sam. "You are familiar with the mill."

"No—oh, no!" wailed Agnes Bates, in despair. "We are lost, I am sure!"

"Not yet," muttered Sam, desperately, as he caught her light form up in his arms and bore her to a spot where there was less danger of suffocation by smoke.

His fireman's instinct led him in the face of this difficulty to go higher up to the roof. But only a ladder led up through a battered skylight.

However, Sam managed to crawl up through this and assist Agnes up, too. They stood on the roof of the burning mill.

Sam went to the edge and looked over. At this point the wind divided the smoke, and he was enabled to see the street below.

Fortunately he yet had his trumpet with him, and placing it to his mouth, he shouted:

"Dan Fuller! Hello!"

Fuller was one of the veterans of No. 6. He heard the hail, and looking up cried:

"Heavens! Look at the boy chief, lads! He is in a bad place!"

"Put up a ladder!" shouted Sam.

"A ladder!" cried Dan Fuller, excitedly. "All hands at

work. It's a good ways up there. Rig two of them together. Lively, or we won't be able to save the boy chief. Lively all!"

How the boys of No. 6 did hustle to get that ladder up. People on the street in the meanwhile gazed agape at the thrilling position of peril held by Sam and Agnes Bates.

Flames were bursting through the roof and threatening them on all sides. The walls trembled, and it became certain that that part of the mill would fall.

The ladder was the only hope. Would it never be raised?

People held their breath and waited anxiously the result. One man rushed out of the crowd and held up his arms, crying in a beseeching manner:

"Oh, Agnes! God help you to come down to me safely! I am your father! Oh, save my child! Save her!"

A glad cry of joy escaped the mill girl's lips as she saw that her father was safe. But Sam was puzzled.

How had the incendiaries outwitted the watchman and gained access to the mill? It was a puzzle, indeed.

But there was no way of solving the riddle other than to wait and consult Hiram Bates himself on this point.

Meanwhile Dan Fuller had rigged the ladder all safely. It was quickly hoisted. It fell a little short of reaching the edge of the roof, but Sam managed to reach over, and clutching the eaves with one hand twined his legs around the uppermost round.

It was a bold act, and the crowd cheered as the athletic young fireman lowered the young girl to the arms of a brother fireman beneath who had come up the ladder.

In this manner Agnes was carried to the ground safely, and was clasped in her father's arms.

As Sam came down, Hiram Bates clutched his arm, and cried fervently:

"You have a grateful father's blessing. I shall never forget you!"

"It is nothing," replied gallant Sam; "but I want to see you after the fire."

"Very well."

"Where shall I see you?"

"My house is No. 12 Beacon Street," replied Hiram Bates. "You can call upon me there, or I shall probably be back here on duty to-morrow night."

"If you had been on duty to-night, how could this fire have occurred?" asked Sam sharply.

"I was on duty," protested the night watchman. "I can explain to you——"

"That is just what I want. Just as soon as the fire is under control I will go to your house. I want you to tell me all. These incendiaries must be dealt with in a summary manner. I will be on hand."

And with this Sam was off about his duties.

It was not likely that there were other lives ^{jeopardy} in the burning mill, so Sam did not attempt to enter it again.

He directed the movements of his company, and so efficiently that before long the fire was deemed under control. The west wing of the mill was in a dismantled state, but the main structure was saved, and all through the wonderful work of the fire boys of Norton.

The last embers were succumbing before the steady play of a stream of water from Hose No. 6, when Sam, begrimed and bedraggled, with trumpet in hand, stood at an angle of the ruins, contemplating the scene. He heard a footstep behind him, and turned to be confronted by Mr. Sinclair, the millionaire.

The magnate of Norton held out his hand to the young fireman, and in a voice which quivered with gratitude and feeling cried:

"Sam Weldon, I want to thank you for your heroic work here to-night."

"If you thank me, you should doubly thank the others," replied Sam simply.

"I do, but I feel particularly grateful to you."

"I have done no more than my comrades."

"Your example has inspired your comrades to a mighty effort to conquer the fire fiend," cried Mr. Sinclair forcibly. "I know how it is, Sam Weldon, and so does everybody else in this town. We all appreciate you and your brave work, you may rest assured."

This was gratifying, indeed, to Sam Weldon. He modestly expressed his thanks, and protested against being given so much honor.

"I want to see you again, Sam," said Mr. Sinclair warmly. "Will you come to my house to-morrow. There is a matter upon my mind which I should like to discuss with you. These incendiaries, I feel sure, can be tracked down, and you are the one to do it."

"I have the purpose in mind now," replied Sam. "However, I will endeavor to see you at the appointed time, Mr. Sinclair."

"I shall look for you. Mind, I shall offer a large reward for the capture of the gang."

"I desire no reward," replied Sam stoutly. "The conviction of having done my duty is fully enough."

At this moment Sam was called away by one of his comrades. The mill owner, Morton Sinclair, gazed after his handsome young form, and murmured:

"I like that boy. He is my ideal. Oh, if I only had a son like him!"

The crowd had long since begun to disperse. The fire companies were limbering up their hose, and a tired and jaded set of men they were, too.

It had been a hard fight, but they had won victory. This was the matter of congratulation. Daylight was appearing, and slowly they wended their way homeward to seek much-needed sleep.

But not so Sam Weldon. He took enough time to wash and clean himself up, then he started for the home of Hiram Bates, the watchman of the mill.

He rapped on the door of the modest little cottage, and was met by Agnes Bates herself. The young girl looked a trifle pale, but very neat and pretty, Sam thought, as she courtesied before him and bade him enter.

Sam exchanged a few pleasant words with Agnes, the result of which convinced him that she was the most charming young girl he had ever met.

As a general thing, Sam was never susceptible to feminine charms, but in this case he was prone to admit himself captivated. However, Hiram Bates entered the room now, and Agnes withdrew.

In a few words Sam explained his mission. The watchman then gave a clear account of the whole affair.

"Do you see that lump on my forehead?" he asked, lifting the hair. "Well, that was caused by the club carried by one of the villains. You see, they came to the gate, pretending to bring me a message from Mr. Sinclair. As I opened the gate one of them struck me on the head with a club. The next thing I knew I was floundering in the river, and being carried over the rapids. I managed, however, to swim ashore half a mile below the mill. When I was able to collect my senses fully, I saw the blaze of the fire, and knew then what the trick was. When I got back to the mill the crowd and the fire companies were there. Luckily this blow was not so serious as they thought, and I did not drown in the river, as they intended."

"Did you see the faces of the incendiaries?" asked Sam.

"No, I did not."

"Then your daughter must have come along about that time, or at least very shortly after you were thrown into the river?"

"Yes," agreed Bates. "She probably alarmed the villains, and they thought it the safest to get rid of her also."

"It is all clear enough now, with the exception of one point," said Sam, "and that is the motive of the incendiaries."

"Ah!" exclaimed Bates, a light breaking across his face. "I believe Mr. Sinclair has a theory in regard to the matter. Years ago he had a bookkeeper in his employ who proved dishonest. The fellow was sent to prison. Mr. Sinclair fancies that the incendiary is this same fellow, and that his motives are those of revenge."

"But why should the whole town be responsible?" asked Sam in surprise.

"For the fact that Mr. Sinclair's interests are wholly identified with this town. No doubt he fancies that in striking a blow at the town he also hits Mr. Sinclair."

"Ah! I see," declared Sam, as he arose. "Well, it's time that a stop was put to this business, and I will undertake to track down the incendiaries myself, if it takes a lifetime to do it!"

Sam took a step toward the door to leave the house; but a thrilling thing happened. Just as his hand touched the knob Agnes Bates, white-faced, stepped before him.

"Oh, sir, do not go out!" she cried, with much trepidation. "There are two evil-looking men in the street, and one of them, I think, has a pistol, and I fear means you harm."

Still Alarm Sam was astounded. Yet so daring was his characteristic spirit of bravery that, instead of heeding Agnes' warning, he cried:

"Is that so? Then let me face them, if they are foes!"

With a quick move he flung open the door; but simultaneous with his appearance on the threshold the crack of a revolver broke on the air, and he dropped in an inanimate heap.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. SINCLAIR'S STORY.

It was really an indiscreet thing for Still Alarm Sam to do in the face of such an urgent warning; but his was an intrepid nature, which was always bound to court rather than to shun danger.

He fell in a heap upon the threshold. A wild terrified cry burst from the white lips of Agnes Bates.

The two men in the street, one of whom had fired the dastardly shot, vanished quickly enough.

The shot and the wild cry of Agnes aroused the neighborhood. Not only did it bring Mr. Bates to the scene, but people rushed from homes near by.

Agnes had bent down over Sam, summoning all her strength, and sat on the floor, with the young fireman's head in her lap, his white face upturned to her's.

"Oh, he is dead—dead!" she wailed. "They have killed him!"

"My God!" gasped Mr. Bates. "Who has done this thing?"

"Oh, it was those two wicked men who were watching the house all the evening!" cried Agnes faintly. "Run for a doctor, somebody, quickly!"

Half a dozen excited messengers were dispatched for a medical man, but before he arrived Sam regained consciousness. To the surprise of all, he instantly arose to a sitting posture.

"Oh, thank heaven, he is alive!" cried Agnes joyfully, and then throwing her soft arms around his neck she rejoined: "But you must not overdo yourself, Sam. You are dangerously wounded."

"No, I think not," replied Sam, striving to overcome the dazed feeling upon him. "I only feel a little stinging pain on top of my head. I shall be all right soon."

"Get some water and wash the blood from his face!" cried Mr. Bates. "Then we can tell where he is hurt."

Water was brought, and the blood washed from Sam's face. Then the course of the bullet was traced, and it was found that he had experienced a narrow escape from death.

The bullet had plowed a furrow along the top of the skull, cutting the scalp and producing a severe concussion.

With the necessary measures to prevent fever, there was no reason why Sam should not easily and quickly recover.

The physician dressed the wound, and, as it was not deemed expedient to move him, Sam was allowed to remain at the Bates' residence.

Here he was compelled to remain in bed, in a darkened room, for three days. In this time Agnes Bates was his kind and devoted nurse, and those were hours which Sam never forgot.

Her soft touch, her beautiful, sweet face over him was all like a dream of great happiness. Indeed, it was with regret that the end of it had come, and after a week he was enabled to go forth as well as ever.

Of course Sam thanked the Bates' for their kind ministrations, but they disclaimed any obligations, for had not Sam saved Agnes from certain death?

During his illness Sam had been the recipient of favors which easily proved his unbounded popularity in Norton.

Beautiful flowers were sent him in profusion, and people were constantly calling to inquire after his condition. He was welcomed upon the street with great joy by everybody.

Of course everything possible had been done to capture the miscreants who had attempted his life; but, as usual, they outwitted the keenest detectives.

Mr. Sinclair himself was a daily visitor at the Bates' house. As soon as Sam was able to go back to duty the mill owner sent a message to the engine house.

Sam found it there one morning, and breaking the seal read:

"Dear Sam:—I wish you would come up to my house this afternoon at three. I would like to see you very much and have a long talk with you. Yours truly, Morton Sinclair."

Of course Sam could not refuse to accept the invitation, and he answered it promptly in person at the time appointed.

As he entered the library of the Sinclair mansion, the mill owner arose from an easy-chair to greet him.

There was a glad light in Mr. Sinclair's eyes as he grasped Sam's hand.

"I am delighted to see you, my boy," he declared. "I am so glad that you have so promptly answered my call."

"Indeed, sir, I am honored by such an invitation," replied Sam politely. "I am at your service."

"I want to talk with you, Sam," said Mr. Sinclair, indicating a chair for Sam to take. "Do you know I have thought of you often since your brave work at the fire?"

"You are very kind," replied Sam.

"I want to first ask you some questions. As I am given to understand, you are an orphan?"

"I am, sir," replied the young fireman.

"What do you know of your parents?" asked Mr. Sinclair.

"Indeed, I was quite young when they died," replied Sam.

"I can dimly remember my father."

"Ah! What was his profession?"

"He was a fireman, like myself. I presume I inherit my calling."

"Quite likely," rejoined Mr. Sinclair, musingly. "Where was your home when your father died, Sam?"

"In New York City."

"Ah! What was your father's full name?"

"Hiram Weldon."

Mr. Sinclair gave a start. Then he arose and went to an antique cabinet in one corner of the room.

From a small drawer in this he took out a miniature, which he brought forward and tendered to Sam.

"Look at that," he said, in a strange voice, "and tell me if it looks anything like your own father."

With a queer thrill, Sam gazed at the miniature. Instantly he sprang to his feet, with the greatest excitement.

"That is my father's picture!" he cried.

"I thought so."

"Where did you get it?"

Mr. Sinclair sank into a chair.

"I will tell you," he said succinctly. "Years ago your father, Hiram Weldon, and I were schoolboys together. We were the warmest of friends. Chums, as it were."

"Indeed! I am glad to know that," said Sam.

"He gave me the miniature a few years after we left school. We parted company, and from that day to this I have never heard of or seen Hiram Weldon."

"But before we parted company, as it has proven, forever," resumed Mr. Sinclair, "we figured in an affair which for thrilling phases is almost without a parallel."

"You will notice that I am quite alone in the world—a man without a family. The reasons for that I will soon give you."

"I once loved, and with all the affection of a true heart. The object of my passion was a very beautiful girl in New York society."

"We were to have been married, Mabel Glenn and I, in a short three months. But among Mabel's admirers was a young Corsican, Paoli Rossi. She had rejected his advances, and, with the hot passion of the native Italian, Rossi had turned his hatred upon me as the sole cause of his defeat."

"He made a vow that he would cheat me out of my love, and he succeeded, as I shall tell you."

"It was at a small card party at the club one night. In some way Rossi contrived to get into our circle. We played with varying fortune, Rossi being a loser, until suddenly the Corsican sprang up and threw down the cards upon the table, and in a tempest of rage accused me of having cheated."

"In an instant the whole room was in an uproar. Of course I indignantly refuted the charge. It was the point desired by the hot-headed Italian, and he threw down his card."

"There was no way but to accept it. Hiram Weldon, your father, at that time a young man of wealth and fashion, was my second. The meeting was all arranged, and I was in for the first duel in my life."

"The weapons were to be pistols, the distance fifty paces. Our seconds met and arranged the affair."

"It was a bit of business I did not like. Duelling is not in any sense an American institution."

"However, the day came, and we met. It was in a little dell near a rural village."

"We supposed that the affair had been kept secret, but it seemed that at the last moment somebody played false."

"We had taken our positions, and the seconds were ready to give the word to fire, when a carriage dashed up to the spot. A young girl, pale and distraught, leaped out, and ran right between us."

"It was Mabel Glenn. She had learned of the affair in some way or other, and, fearful that I would be killed, sought to stay the proceedings."

"How it happened we never could rightly tell, but Rossi always declared that he never saw Mabel, and that he heard the word 'fire!'"

"At any rate, his pistol exploded. Mabel Glenn gave a sharp cry of agony, and fell to the ground. We instantly reached her side, and the physician and surgeon in attendance gave her his instant care. But she never breathed again."

"She was dead instantly. The dastardly bullet had penetrated her heart."

"I was like a madman. It required the efforts of all the others to hold me and keep me from doing fearful harm to the wretched author of my misery.

"In one fell moment my life's happiness was destroyed, my hopes were dashed forever.

"Rossi escaped the clutches of the law, and it was rumored that he went to Corsica. I have never seen him since, but I received a warning letter, apprising me that the vendetta between us was not yet settled, and that, even if years were to elapse, his revenge would yet be completed.

"I did not know then, as I have since learned, that the vendetta is a family affair, and affects the honor of a man's descendants, who are in honor bound to take up the vendetta when the relative dies.

"So it happened that one day a dark-featured young man came into my employ. He gave the name of Ross. Being an expert accountant, I gladly gave him employment until I became assured of his dishonesty and dangerous character.

"Dangerous, for I shortly learned that Ross was simply a modification of Rossi, and that he was the son of my old Corsican foe, and had given his dying father an oath to accomplish the vendetta.

"Of course I discharged him. Since then he has held the whole town in a state of terrorism by his acts of incendiarism. He aims his blows at the townspeople as well as me, for he knows that their interests are mine, for I am the founder of Norton, which did not exist before my mills were built.

"You know now, Sam, the whole story. Bud Ross, the incendiary, is really the son of my old foe, Paoli Rossi. He seeks my life, as well as to destroy the town. This is my story, Sam, and you understand now why I am so particularly interested in you, and also in what manner your father and I were related."

Mr. Sinclair ceased speaking, and Sam was so overwhelmed with the force of this narrative that he could not speak for a while.

"My father never told me of all this," he finally declared. "It is a most interesting story. Now I understand the motive of the incendiary, Bud Ross. I am more than pleased to know that you were a former friend of my father."

"Hiram Weldon was one of the noblest of men," declared Mr. Sinclair.

"I thank you for that," replied Sam warmly. "I love to regard my father in that light; but I shudder when I think of the awful danger which threatens you. Something must be done. This murderous villain must be captured before he can do further harm."

"You are right, Sam," declared Mr. Sinclair. "I am no coward, but I feel that I am in great danger. I have faith that you can help me."

"Rest assured that I will," cried Sam resolutely.

"How can we disarm the foe?"

Sam arose from his chair, and a pallor overspread his face. At that moment he had heard a sudden and distant sound—a sound which brought the hot blood in surges to his brain.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

It was the distant strokes of a bell.

They exchanged glances. To both the stroke was comprehensive. It caused a chill to settle over one's heart.

"Fire!" exclaimed Sam, in a metallic voice. Another blow is struck by the foe, Mr. Sinclair."

"You are right," gasped the mill owner, sinking half fainting into a chair. "God grant it may not be the mills!"

"Whatever, or wherever it is," cried Sam, starting for the door, "it is my call for duty. Pardon my sudden leave-taking, Mr. Sinclair, but I am called, and must go. Don't lose heart!"

With this ringing cry, Still Alarm Sam ran from the house.

Just as he reached the street he heard the cry from the depths of the city below:

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

CHAPTER V.

AT THE FIRE.

Down the street Sam ran at a wild rate of speed. He did not go to the engine house, for he knew that the truck would be out before he could get there.

Instead he ran for the scene of the fire.

A dull glow against the sky showed him the location. Almost as if by instinct he found his way to the scene of action.

The bells were clanging, and a vast crowd was surging through the streets as he ran on.

Suddenly he came into the street where the fire was. He saw flames pouring from the lower windows of a tenement block.

This tenement was owned by Mr. Sinclair, and was the lodging house of some of the mill operators. At once Sam concluded that the fire was incendiary.

In spite of the fact that he was at a great distance when the fire alarm rang, he was on the scene almost as quickly as any of the others.

At once he took command of his own fire company, and swiftly and skillfully directed operations.

The fire had originated in the lower stories of the house. The flames were making swift headway, and gave evidence of being hard to check.

It was evening, the shadows of night thickening fast. The hour of Sam's call at Mr. Sinclair's had been three o'clock, but he had stayed there longer than he thought for.

At this hour, however, a great many people were abroad, and the street was instantly filled with a vast throng.

All was confusion and excitement. Policemen roped off the street to give the fire companies plenty of room to work.

Unfortunately it was some distance to a good supply of water, and by the time the pipes had been laid and the pumping began the fire had gained tremendous headway.

There was no use in trying to unearth the origin of the fire now. The one impulse was to conquer the flames. There would be time enough for investigation afterwards.

Still Alarm Sam was here, there, and everywhere, directing the work of his men, and taking an active hand himself.

Several streams of water were gotten upon the flames, and the fire was speedily fairly under control.

Not until this juncture, in the face of the great excitement, had there been a thought of the possibility of there being anybody in the house.

But Still Alarm Sam had not been oblivious of this fearful possibility. He had made inquiry, but without any result.

It was known that a large number of people lived in the house. But whether all had been warned of the fire or not was not easy to say.

In view of this doubt, Sam determined to place a ladder and enter the upper stories.

No sooner had this resolution seized him than the crowd parted, and a white-faced, screaming woman ran through the throng.

"Oh, my baby!" she wailed. "Save him! I left him in my room in the top story, asleep! I had to go out to the market! Oh, save my baby!"

A tremendous sensation was instantly created. The knowledge that a sleeping infant, a mother's treasure, was in the burning building, and almost certain to be burned alive, was a fearful one. Everybody groaned with horror.

Even the brave firemen paused in their work, and gazed with a shudder up to the upper story of the doomed structure.

It did not seem as if any human power could rescue the child. Even the stoutest-hearted of the brave fire fighters shrank from that fearful risk.

But Still Alarm Sam, cool and calm, approached the agonized mother.

"Have courage, my good woman," he said quietly. "I will save your baby, if such a thing is possible!"

"God bless you, sir!" cried the distraught woman. "You will earn my gratitude for life!"

"But tell me, which is the room?" asked Sam.

"That one in the corner. Oh, see! My God! The flames have already reached it, and my darling sleeps there!"

Still Alarm Sam hesitated no longer. With quick orders he caused the long ladder to be hoisted.

It was found necessary to splice it to reach the window ledge, and this took time. Time was valuable just now, for the smoke was pouring out of that window in a torrent.

But the ladder was finally rigged, and, amid the cheers of the crowd, Sam ascended it.

Up he went, higher and higher, and now he was seen to reach the window ledge. One moment he paused, and was seen to wrap his jacket about his neck and nostrils, and then he plunged into the chamber.

He was lost to view for the time being in the smoke. Some time passed, and the people craned their necks in the vain hope of seeing him return to the ladder.

But he did not reappear. Moreover, a thrill of horror ran through the crowd at a sight which now was presented.

The flames, bursting from a lower story, wreathed about the ladder, and bid fair to speedily consume it.

It was necessary to remove it or it would be quickly destroyed. But still the fire boys hesitated, hoping all the while that Sam would reappear.

For some unaccountable reason he did not. Time elapsed, and somebody in the crowd with a groan exclaimed:

"He has made his last rescue. This time he has met his death."

So, in fact, it seemed. Yet there were those who clung to hope. At last the ladder was lowered. Still Sam did not make his appearance.

Everybody had given him up for lost, when suddenly a mighty shout went up from the multitude.

There, upon the blazing roof, suddenly became visible in the firelight the helmet and red shirt of Still Alarm Sam!

In his arms he carried a bundle. It was the babe, without doubt.

Now he stood in bold relief upon the roof, and made signals to those below. Instantly ready hands seized the ladder, and up it went.

It failed to reach the gutter, however. Ten feet short it was, and Sam was unable to drop with safety this distance.

Here was a fearful predicament. What was to be done? In the excitement of the moment the coolest and bravest were flustered.

The fire was raging in the old shell like a seething volcano. Every moment the walls trembled and seemed likely to fall in.

It seemed at the moment as if no earthly power could save the young hero who had ventured his own life to save another. But now a great shudder ran through the crowd.

Still Alarm Sam was seen to motion to his comrades below. Then a cry went up:

"He has a rope! See! He will make use of it!"

This was true. Sam always carried at his belt a small, strong rope, made of a material fireproof, and nearly one hundred feet in length.

Though a slender cord, it was capable of supporting the heaviest man.

This he was now seen to tie about the body of the infant.

In the meanwhile one of the fire boys had run up the ladder to meet the precious bundle which was being lowered on the rope.

The crowd held its breath in deep suspense. Would the rescuers succeed?

Down went the precious burden. Now it was in the hands of the waiting fireman.

A quick untying of the cord, and the babe was safe in strong arms. The rope was left dangling in the air, and a moment later the sleeping babe was in its overjoyed mother's arms.

How the excited crowd did shout and cheer. It was an incident which brought tears to every eye, and for a time the greatest of excitement reigned.

Then a deep and mighty hush fell upon all. The brave rescuer, the hero of the hour, was facing death in its most awful form.

Had he saved the life of the innocent babe but to sacrifice his own? Would Heaven not aid him to escape?

He was seen upon the trembling roof of the blazing building. He crawled to the edge of the roof and essayed to swing over and reach the upper rounds of the ladder.

But the distance was too great.

His reach was far too short. One moment he wavered there.

Then he was seen to arise and crawl up the steep side of the roof. While he was doing this the whole structure trembled, and seemed likely to fall at any moment.

CHAPTER VI.

A DEATH TRAP.

Words cannot depict the situation truthfully, nor the sensations of the witnesses of the fearful scene.

Sam Weldon, the young hero of the hour, seemed doomed to perish. There were scores of brave men in the crowd who would have gone to his rescue had such a thing been possible.

But it was not, and they were powerless to help him.

With a sickening sense of horror the crowd watched him, and looked with a deadly fascination for the moment when the building should collapse and he would go down to his death.

But this moment did not come. Fate had not ordained that brave Sam Weldon should thus so ignobly perish.

He was seen to clamber up the roof, and his objective point was a chimney. He reached this and clung to it.

One end of the fireproof rope he passed about the chimney and knotted it tightly. He allowed the other end to fall over the edge, and now seizing a firm hold he began to slide down the rope.

Down the roof he went, and the next moment was over the edge and suspended in midair between heaven and earth.

Had the rope parted it would have been a frightful fall; but it was of too stanch material.

Down, down he slid. Mighty volumes of flame and smoke poured out of the windows and enveloped him.

Had he been unaccustomed to fire, and less able to protect himself against the blasting, withering effect of the flames, he would have been badly burned.

But through the burst of flame he dropped—quickly winding the rope about his knees, sailor fashion.

He now reached the extremity of the rope, and his feet touched the ground. In an instant a legion of his friends were about him.

Such an ovation he had never before received. He was

completely overwhelmed with the demonstrations of praise and gratitude showered upon him.

For a moment Sam was weak and faint from the severe strain of the ordeal. His skin was scorched and blistered and his face begrimed with smoke.

But he thought not of his personal injuries. He was instantly on duty again and directing the fight of the flames.

It was wonderful with what tenacity the structure held out against the devouring element. No amount of water could do aught save to keep the fire from spreading. Yet the building stood.

And now, as if to cap a mighty climax, the event most thrilling of the day occurred.

Suddenly an awful cry went up from the crowd. Every eye was again centered upon the roof.

Merciful heavens! There, crouching upon the roof, was a human being. It was the form of a young girl scantily clad. Now, several of those who resided in the tenement remembered her as a little cripple who had lived with an aged mother in the upper story.

"Ah, well," some one said, "she is only a cripple. It would be a mercy to let her go."

Sam Weldon heard this remark. His cheeks burned as he shouted:

"Never! It is a human life, and shall be saved. Up with a longer ladder. I will save her or die!"

"Don't be foolhardy, Sam," cried Dan Fuller, in remonstrance. "You just came down from there, and the roof was going then."

"Put up the ladder!" cried Sam.

"You'll never come down alive!"

Remonstrance was of no avail. Sam was determined to rescue the little cripple.

Accordingly the ladder was once again hoisted.

The fireproof rope yet remained fastened to the chimney. Sam went up the ladder like a monkey.

When he reached the topmost round he began to go hand over hand up the rope.

He was an expert climber, and gained the roof easily enough. He crept up to where the little cripple was.

Her face was ashen pale, and her teeth chattered. Sam's smile reassured her, as he said:

"Cling right to me, little one. No harm shall come to you."

The cripple placed her arms about his neck and did as she was bid. Sam made his way cautiously to the edge of the roof.

He hastily drew up the rope and fastened its end about the child's body under her arms. Then bracing his feet against the gutter, he proceeded to lower her rapidly to the ground.

Willing hands received her below, and Sam quickly slid down the rope to the ladder, and thence to the ground, having accomplished his second brave rescue of the day.

He was none too soon, for it chanced that the fire had reached a culminating point, and just as Sam reached a point of safety the building collapsed.

The fire was now quickly gotten under control, and kept from spreading. It was a late hour that night, however, when the last heap of ruins was deemed safe to leave, and the fire boys wended their way homeward.

The crowd had dispersed some time since. Sam was almost the last to leave the scene.

He left the spot alone, intending to make his way back to the engine house and retire for the night.

But some thrilling incidents were destined to interfere seriously with his plans.

As he was making a short cut across several vacant lots of land he passed quite near to a board fence, erected by some prominent advertising firm for the purpose of displaying their goods. From behind this he heard the low hum of voices.

Ordinarily, Sam would have passed by without any thrill of interest whatever. But a singular conviction seized him.

"Rather an out of the way place for people to meet at this hour," he reflected. "I wonder if——"

He paused. One of the voices was now raised in a higher key. He recognized it as that of the man with whom he had scuffled that night in the cellar.

At once Sam was interested. He crept up to the board fence and listened.

The two men, for they were two in number, were talking on the other side of the fence.

Sam knew that one of them was Bud Ross, the incendiary. Every word they uttered came plainly to his hearing.

"Ah, partner, we have made one more good stroke for revenge to-night," Ross said, in a vengeful tone. "If my father can look down from Paradise, he will strongly approve of this night's work."

"You are right, Bud."

"That old tenement went up like tinder, didn't it?"

"You bet."

"But what a dare-devil of a young fiend that Sam Weldon is. Curse him! He is a bad stumbling block in our path, my boy."

"I believe you; but what can we do with him?"

"Shuffle him off this mortal coil if he gives us any further trouble."

"I think it would be safer."

"Well, we have had a good night's experience. Let us go home and sleep."

"I am with you."

The two villains began to walk away. Sam looked about him in a quandary.

Oh, for a policeman! He almost ventured to attack them alone. These were the incendiaries who terrorized Norton, and they should be captured; but Sam yielded to prudence.

However, he followed them. It was possible before he had gone far he would be able to obtain assistance.

Just across one street was the high falls of the river which Norton was situated upon. A long dam extended across the river here, over which the water poured in a tremendous torrent.

There was a walk built upon the top of the dam. By many it was used as a bridge to cross the river.

The incendiaries walked out onto this dam. They vanished in the deep gloom. Fearful of losing track of them, Sam eagerly pushed forward.

He walked unsuspectingly out on the dam. He could see nothing of his birds. They must have crossed the river by this time.

Convinced of this, Sam ran hastily upon the dam. Half way across, where the water was highest, was a small house, built for the protection of a barometer station.

Sam did not suspect the awful peril so close upon him. He did not dream that his foes were aware of the fact that he was following them.

Not until he reached the small barometer station. Then, as he was hastily passing, two forms leaped out upon him like wolves. He was like a child in their grasp, and in a twinkling was hurled over the edge of the dam, and went over the high falls to a seeming awful death!

CHAPTER VII.

A BIT OF DETECTIVE WORK.

It was a fearful death trap into which Still Alarm Sam had walked. Over the edge he went in a twinkling, and was in the fearful, mad waters of the cataract.

He was caught and tossed high in the air by the torrent, then rapidly whirled over the rapids, now shooting under the water and now to the surface. The blow he had received was a stunning one, but the chill waters revived him.

As soon as he could collect himself he managed to keep his head above the torrent.

The mere fact that he had been hurled into the cataract was the saving of his life.

The swirling waters did not allow him to sink. Had the water been a deep, quiet pool he would probably have sunk to rise no more.

Down over the rapids he shot like a bolt. He was whirled and hurled right and left; and received many bruises from contact with the rocks in the river bed.

But at length he came out into clear water. He had safely passed the rapids. It was a miraculous salvation.

With all his strength Sam set out for the shore.

He swam with great difficulty, for his clothes heavily weighted him, but by dint of great effort he managed to finally reach the shore and crawl out.

He sank down, panting and overcome, upon the sands.

For some time he was in a fainting condition. He had been very near death, and this reaction was not strange.

He lay for some time upon the shore. The cool night wind, however, fanned his brow, and he gradually revived.

After a time he was able to get again upon his feet. He collected his scattered senses, and decided upon a plan of action.

He mentally berated his stupidity in falling into the trap which had nigh proved his death.

That he should have been so blind as to allow his foes to play such a simple trick upon him was strange. They certainly had the best of the situation. But what was to be done now?

Should he return to the dam? It was hardly likely that he would find his foes there at this time.

Yet he resolved to do this. So he made his way back along the river bank. Very soon he came to the dam again.

This time he was cautious enough to advance with care.

It was easy to see where the would-be assassins had secreted themselves behind the small structure in the middle of the dam.

But they were not there now. Sam, however, crossed the dam, and went on blindly in the search.

It chanced that a small public house stood near the river's edge. Sam saw a light in the window, and approached it.

The sound of voices and the clink of glasses came from the interior of this place.

Sam crept up to a window, and gazed upon a peculiar scene.

The interior of the room into which he looked was fitted up with a bar and tables. At both men were engaged in drinking.

Sam gazed from one group of the drinkers to another, until suddenly his gaze became fixed upon two men at a table not far from the door.

It was a retired spot, and the appearance and actions of the men at once satisfied Sam that they were the two incendiaries. He experienced a great thrill.

"They evidently fancy that I went to my death over the cataract," he muttered. "And they feel safe from pursuit. I am in luck."

He tried in vain to get a good look at the men's faces. Their slouch hats, however, concealed their features, and he was baffled.

They were engaged in discussing over a bottle of whisky, and were conversing in low tones.

Sam would have given much to be able to overhear what they said. But he could not.

An idea occurred to him.

"Supposing I enter the place," he muttered. "Perhaps I could do it unperceived, and gain a point near them, and perhaps play eavesdropper."

Then he looked at his clothes. They were dripping wet, and would betray him.

This plan he felt bound to abandon.

"I'm not much of a detective," he muttered, "or I should be able to work my points here in some manner. I presume the safest and proper thing is to call an officer and have them arrested on suspicion."

This looked like the most sensible idea; but when Sam considered its feasibility he was again stuck.

There was no officer in sight. If he should leave the spot to call one, he was by no means assured that his birds would be there on his return.

So he was obliged to abandon this idea; but another quickly suggested itself.

On the opposite corner of the building was a window which was partly open. Sam would not be quite so near to the incendiaries there as where he was, but possibly he would be able to hear better.

To think with him was to act. He at once slipped around the corner of the building quickly and silently.

He approached the open window and glanced through it. Instantly he experienced a chill.

The table where the two incendiaries had sat was empty.

They were not in sight in the room. Sam could draw no other conclusion but that they had left the public house.

Instantly he glided around to the door. He could not have been out of hearing in that limited time. Yet no sign of them was to be seen or heard.

For a moment the young fireman was completely baffled.

He was dead sure that they had left the public house. Happily, Sam was a youth of quick wit and ready perception, and a swift idea struck him.

Around the house he ran to the rear. Here was another means of exit, and he arrived just in time to hear retreating footsteps and voices in the dense gloom.

Instantly he dashed in pursuit.

The men had gone in the direction of the river, and Sam now heard the grating of a boat's keel on the sand, and then the chuck of oars.

The next moment he reached the river bank. He could just see the dim outlines of a boat receding in the gloom. He was again outwitted.

At first, the resolute young fireman considered the feasibility of pursuit; but there was no other boat on the shore, so he was obliged to abandon the idea.

Disappointed beyond expression, Sam slowly recrossed the dam, and made his way back to the engine house.

He retired to his room just as daylight was breaking, and slept soundly for a few hours.

Then he was again astir, and descended to find Mr. Sinclair awaiting him. Sam told of his experiences of the night, and Mr. Sinclair listened with deep interest.

With a shiver, he said:

"I don't know why, Sam, but I feel a dread presentiment that my fate is at hand. I certainly shall not rest easy until Bud Ross is behind bars."

"And that is where he shall be placed before many days!" cried Sam determinedly. "The residents of Norton should make common cause against him."

Several days passed. Nothing was said by Sam to any person other than Mr. Sinclair of his encounter with the incendiaries.

But detectives were busily at work. The incendiary did not show his hand for some time. When he did it was in a threatening way.

One day Sam descended into the engine house to find pinned to the wall a folded note, which was superscribed to himself.

What was more thrilling, was the fact that this note was written in characters of blood.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE DANCE.

Sam unfolded the note with a peculiar sensation. In clear, legible chirography there was traced in blood upon the white paper the following:

"For Sam Weldon:—You may have the nine lives of a cat, but you cannot hope to escape ultimate death. It is near at hand. Beware! One of the Incendiaries."

Sam was not one to be frightened by such an empty threat as this. He laughed contemptuously, and tore the message into small fragments.

"Nobody but a coward would send such a message as that," he muttered. "I have no fear of such a threat."

It happened at this time that the town was astir with the near approach of an annual event of importance.

This was the yearly field day and meet of the fire companies. It was an event of great interest, and was generally held upon the common, a vast expanse of green in the heart of the city.

Here the various fire companies met and participated in competitive trials of skill. It was a general gala day, with the general list of amusements, and always winding up with a dance in the evening.

Sam was appointed floor manager of the dance, and he always filled the position gracefully. Everybody looked forward with great anticipations to the day of the firemen's meet.

Upon the morning of the gala day a vast crowd thronged the streets to witness the first parade of the fire companies.

Hook and Ladder No. 6 made a fine appearance. At their head walked Still Alarm Sam, and their appearance drew wild cheers from the crowd.

What gave Sam a special thrill of happiness was the fact that just as he was passing a certain house he saw a sweet girl face with sparkling eyes bent full upon him. His face crimsoned, and his heart beat like a trip-hammer as he lifted his hat gracefully to the sweet smile and salutation of fair Agnes Bates.

After the parade all went to the common to witness the sports.

First on the list were trials of speed between the different fire companies.

The distance was two hundred yards, and from start to finish No. 6, with Still Alarm Sam in the lead, led the way.

Next followed ladder climbing, and in this Sam won the prize. After this other competitive tests followed, in which, however, Sam took no part.

While participating in the trials he had caught a glimpse of Agnes and her father in a carriage near.

As soon as possible he made his way to her side. A pleasant conversation followed, which resulted in Sam's extending Agnes an invitation to the supper and dance.

The young girl accepted blushing, while Mr. Bates said jocularly:

"I hope you will take good care of her, Sam. I would not trust her with every young man."

"I will try to," replied the young fireman modestly.

With Agnes upon his arm, Sam made his way to the supper hall. The young couple were very happy in their companionship, and their spirits flowed together in that happy moment.

But the evil-doer was, as usual, on hand. He watched them

with a sneering, jealous smile. Royal Bent, who was infatuated with Agnes' beauty, followed them about with malicious thoughts uppermost in his mind.

"I thought so," he muttered bitterly. "That young fireman is the stumbling block in my path. He has won her heart, as one can plainly see. She would scorn me to take up with him. I will spoil that little game."

A deep curse crushed its way through his set teeth, and a lurid glare shone in his eyes. He continued to dog the footsteps of the two young people.

After partaking of the supper, Sam was obliged to repair at once to the dance hall, as he was floor manager; but he found a good seat for Agnes, where she was to await his return.

In a few moments the floor was covered with dancers. Sam was busy arranging the sets.

Royal Bent's evil glance was fixed upon Agnes. This to the villain seemed his chance.

He advanced, and bowing with a sycophant smile, said:

"Ah, Miss Bates, may I have the honor of the first dance?"

Instinctively Agnes shrank away from him, and replied coldly:

"I am engaged to Mr. Weldon for that dance. Pray, excuse me."

"Ah, very sorry," continued the villain, with an assumption of regret. "I may ask for the next, then?"

"Pardon me, but my dances are all promised," replied Agnes coldly.

The villain's face darkened like a thunder cloud. His eyes held a light which terrified Agnes.

"What!" he exclaimed ironically. "Not a dance to spare? Come, now, that is hardly fair. I cannot recognize the right of that young fireman to monopolize all your time. It is unfair, not to say hoggish."

The villain's last words were sharp, even rude. Agnes felt sick and faint. Her loathing for the man before her was of the most intense description.

"I have the right unquestionably to bestow my dances where I please," replied Agnes, with dignity.

This capped the climax. Ben was simply infuriated. He made an attempt to curb his vicious temper.

"So you do not care to bestow a dance upon me?" he gritted angrily. "I don't know that you can afford to discriminate so finely, Miss Bates. For a simple mill girl your assurance is, to say the least, refreshing."

This was an insult, and, with all her soul on fire, Agnes arose. With the air of a queen she exclaimed:

"Sir, I beg to inform you that even a mill girl has rights which gentlemen are bound to respect! I ask you to relieve me of your presence."

"Not yet!" gritted the villain. "I want to tell you where you stand. The owner of the mills, where you and your father get a living, is my own uncle. I could wield my influence to have you discharged to-morrow. Is it, then, policy for you to fling contumely into my face for the sake of a miserable little pauper of a fireman, who——"

"Sir!"

Ben wheeled as if upon a pivot. The object of his last vituperative remark stood before him. Sam's eyes blazed.

Bent winced, but assumed an air of bravado.

"I have been grossly insulted," he said sharply. "I will not stand it! I demand an apology from you, Miss Bates!"

"Scoundrel!" cried Sam heatedly. "It is you who shall make apology! I have heard your remarks to this young lady, who is under my protection. I have charge of this dance to-night, and you shall apologize abjectly, or I will have you put out of the hall!"

"Have me put out of the hall!" roared Bent savagely. "Why,

you young whippersnapper, it would be as much as your life is worth."

"Will you apologize?"

Sam advanced and faced the villain sternly. Bent's savage temper was up, and he clenched his fists.

"Before I do I will thrash you for your impertinence!" he cried madly. "Take that, you pauper!"

Bent struck out savagely with his right fist. The blow took Sam in the cheek, and made a slight abrasion.

At all times the young fireman was a devotee of peace, but this was taxing human endurance too far.

Swift as lightning he returned the blow. It was like the kick of a horse, and Bent went down in a heap.

In an instant all was a scene of excitement.

CHAPTER IX.

THE VENDETTA ENDED.

In that instant Sam regretted the notoriety which thus was brought upon him.

The blow which he had given Bent was well deserved, but Sam had no desire to follow it up.

He essayed to take Agnes' arm and lead her from the spot, but Bent was upon his feet in the passion of a wild beast.

"Curse you!" he roared wildly. "I'll have your life for this! You dare strike me, you young puppy!"

Sam was compelled to stand upon his guard.

"Stand off, sir!" he cried sternly. "I seek no quarrel with you. I give you fair warning."

"I'll have your heart's blood!" hissed the villain, as he sprang tiger-like at Sam.

The young fireman was just in time to ward off a murderous blow.

He was compelled to stand upon the defensive, and again, after parrying a few blows, knocked his adversary down.

Bent was upon his feet, and would have rushed at Sam again, but a couple of officers reached the spot, and checked the combat.

Bent was with difficulty restrained. It became necessary to drag him from the hall.

"Oh, Sam!" exclaimed Agnes clinging to the young fireman's arm. "What a terrible man that is. Oh, I fear he may yet do you some fearful harm!"

"It is not of myself I think," replied Sam, "but of you. It is evident that he means to persecute you if he can."

"Oh, dear! It has spoiled my evening's enjoyment. Oh, let us go home, Sam!"

"We will, if you desire," replied Sam; "but do not yield to fear, Agnes. He can do us no possible harm. He is a miserable coward at best."

The music now began, and the dance opened. With the inspiring strains the young girl's courage somewhat revived, and she allowed Sam to lead her into the dance.

But the hall had not been circled by the dancers twice, when a startling sound burst upon the hearing of all. It stopped the music and brought everybody to a halt.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

"Fire!"

The effect was tremendous. Instantly a mighty rush was made by the fire boys for the outer air.

There was no time to lose.

Sam hastily led Agnes to a seat, where her father was playing the part of spectator.

"I will see you again!" he said hurriedly. "Good-by! Duty calls me."

The next moment he was in the outer air. Hook and Ladder

truck No. 6 stood near. Sam seized the rope, and his comrades were quickly with him.

With a wild cheer they were off.

They were the first company out of the common. A dull glare against the sky showed the direction to take to reach the fire.

After them came the other companies. Very soon the fire could be definitely located.

It was in the outskirts of the town, and as they drew near Sam nearly fainted with horror, as he saw that it was the Sinclair residence.

Instantly he attributed it to the incendiaries. With a mighty effort the hook and ladder truck was brought up to the scene of the fire.

Next came an engine, and then a line of hose was got out and water was instantly thrown upon the flames.

But the fire had gained great headway. It was easy to see that the house was doomed.

Sam's first thought was of human life.

A group of terrified servants were huddled near.

"Is there any one in the house?" he asked them.

"Yes," was the reply. "Mr. Sinclair, we think, is asleep in his room."

"My God!" gasped Sam. "I fear he is overcome with the smoke."

He gave orders instantly to have a ladder placed against the house. The veteran, Dan Fuller, cried:

"What are you going to do, Sam?"

"I am going into the house," replied the young fireman.

"What for?"

"To save Mr. Sinclair."

"Great heavens! Is he in the house?"

"Yes."

"Then you might as well give him up. He is surely dead. Don't go in there, Sam. You'll never come out alive!"

"It would haunt me if I knew that Mr. Sinclair was left in that house to die!" cried Sam. "Stand by, all, to run up the ladder!"

His command was obeyed. The ladder was placed against the upper chamber window sill, and Sam went up the rounds with agility.

With a blow of his ax he broke out the sash.

A mighty volume of smoke rolled out, but this did not check him. He went through the windows and into a room beyond.

By crouching down upon the floor Sam made his way through the room. He became satisfied, after a brief investigation, that there was no occupant there.

He worked his way gradually across a hallway and into a chamber opposite.

Here the atmosphere was quite clear. Everything in the room was as plainly visible as in daylight, the flames flashing their light in from the hall.

And as he stepped over the threshold, Sam Weldon beheld a sight which he never forgot to his dying day.

It was a scene at once so horrible, so dreadful, that instinctively he was forced for a moment to shut it out, clapping his hands over his eyes.

His nerves gradually became stronger, and then he went forward and knelt down over the body of a man lying in a pool of blood.

It required but a glance at the marble-hued, distorted features for him to recognize Mr. Sinclair, the mill owner.

Driven to the hilt in his bosom was a dagger. Pinned to this was a paper. Sam could read plainly the words upon it, printed in letters of blood:

"Corsica le Vendetta. Paoli Rossi is avenged!"

Sam staggered to his feet. A wild, awful horror was upon him.

"Oh, God! The vendetta is accomplished," he cried; "but the murderer must be punished."

Then he reflected that if the body perished in the flames there would be no evidence that a murder had been committed.

This decided him upon a desperate move, and he bent down over the corpse of the murdered man.

He quickly unpinned the bit of paper, and drew the dagger from the dead man's breast.

CHAPTER X.

A DARK CRIME.

Sam placed the dagger and the paper with Paoli Rossi's name upon it into an inner pocket of the dead man's coat.

Mr. Sinclair was not a heavy man, and Sam easily lifted the body.

He staggered toward the window by which he had entered the house. A terrific gust of wind sent a cloud of smoke and flame into his face and nearly blinded him.

For a moment he feared that he would be unable to reach the window, but the burst of flame subsided, and he saw his way once more.

Staggering with his heavy load he reached the window at last.

The ladder yet rested against the sill. He leaned out, and a wild cheer went up as the boy fireman appeared to view. Then it was seen that he had another person in his arms.

"It is Mr. Sinclair," was the cry. "Up the ladder, somebody, and help him."

Two of the firemen sprang up the ladder instantly. One reached the sill, and Mr. Sinclair's body was lowered to him by Sam, and he in turn lowered it to the man beneath him, and in this way the dead mill owner was taken out of the burning house.

It was an easy matter then for Sam to slide down to the ground safely.

He was none too soon, for the flames burst up through the floor of the room he had just left, and the ladder was withdrawn just in time to prevent its being consumed.

Mr. Sinclair's body was carried to an arbor near, and several physicians were on hand. No one suspected that the magnate was murdered, or even dead, until the attending surgeons saw the knife wound in his breast.

Then Sam appeared and told his story. The crowd were excluded from the arbor, but managed to get an inkling of the truth, when a tremendous sensation was created.

Morton Sinclair, the millionaire of Norton, had been foully murdered. The report was one hardly to be credited.

Yet there was the verification. As soon as order could be evolved out of chaos the coroner was sent for, and preparations were made for the holding of an inquest.

The body was removed to the undertaker's rooms, with the permit of the coroner. The inquest had been appointed for an early hour in the morning.

The fine residence of the rich mill owner was in ashes. The alarm had been given too late to make it possible for the fire department to extinguish the fire.

Slowly the fire boys gathered up their traps, and prepared to leave the scene. By daybreak their engines were housed, and all were getting a brief stretch of sleep before the day came on.

Still Alarm Sam, now that the excitement of the fire was over, realized more fully the enormity and the pathetic features of the dark crime. He was dazed with the horror of the thing.

He could not sleep, but paced the floor of his room over the engine house until the sun was high in the morning sky.

"My God! It's too awful for belief!" he muttered, clenching his hands and contorting his features. "What a fearful, villainous thing the vendetta is! The human hound who has taken this good man's life should be hung higher than Haman. And, by the justice, I will live to see it!"

He spoke vehemently, and felt warranted in it. Certainly a more inhuman crime could not be conceived. He remembered well the story told him by Mr. Sinclair.

Yes, there was no doubt as to who the murderer was.

The son of the Corsican, Paoli Rossi, or, as he called himself in English, Bud Ross, was the author of the vendetta's frightful consummation.

There was only one thing to be done. Bud Ross should be tracked down and convicted, after which he should suffer the penalty of the law.

At the hour of the inquest Sam was promptly on hand.

Quite a large crowd was present, and interest in the proceedings was intense.

Sam had only to tell the position in which he found the body, and to produce the dagger and the written legend attached to it.

This established clearly the fact that Mr. Sinclair had been murdered. Other testimony was heard to the fact that Bud Ross was the Americanized son of the Corsican, Paoli Rossi. To his door the commission of the crime could only be laid.

Apropos of this conclusion, the coroner's jury so rendered the verdict, and at once a large reward was offered for the capture and conviction of Bud Ross.

The intense excitement which this affair created in the small town of Norton can well be imagined.

It was the chief topic of conversation everywhere. Numerous enough were the theories offered as to the identity of the murderer, but no one could tell where to find him.

And now, in the course of days, came the question as to who should be administrator of the estate of Morton Sinclair, and who were the heirs. One was prompt in turning up.

A man presented himself at the office of Welch & Ward, the attorneys usually in Mr. Sinclair's employ, and presented his claim. He was no other than the villain Royal Bent.

It was true that Bent was a nephew of Mr. Sinclair. As he was the nearest living relative, there seemed no reason why he should not inherit. There was no doubt but that, if Mr. Sinclair had left a will, he would have disinherited his dissipated nephew, but no will could be found.

Quite a stir was created when it was reported that Bent was likely to become the successor of Mr. Sinclair. It had been more than once whispered about the town that Bent was one of the gang of incendiaries, and that his sole idea was that of revenge upon his wealthy uncle for refusing him an allowance of money on the ground of family kinship.

And now that it seemed certain that the villain was to become the master of the Sinclair fortune there was little wonder that people experienced a peculiar shock and thrill. As for Still Alarm Sam, he had a strong theory as to the identity of the murderer, but in the absence of any real proof he was powerless to act.

Mr. Royal Bent certainly had the best of the situation. He presented his claims and substantiated them. In vain search was made for a will. Mr. Sinclair had died intestate.

As a result, in due course of time, Royal Bent inherited the estate of Morton Sinclair. People shook their heads gravely, and averred as a positive belief that if such a thing was only possible the dead man would arise from his grave to protest.

Bent assumed the proprietorship of the Sinclair estate in a pompous manner. His first move was to completely revolutionize everything, turning away the servants, and discharging the former overseers in the mill.

For a time his rule was with a rod of iron, and he speedily incurred the hatred of all his employees. But Bent cared little for all this. His thoroughly selfish nature would admit of charity for no one.

Thus affairs went on for a long time. One fact became notable. Since his succession to the estate nothing had been heard of the incendiaries. With the death of Mr. Sinclair their work terminated.

Among those discharged from the mill was the night watchman, Mr. Bates. Bent had intimated in an insulting manner that if Agnes would receive his advances he would retain her father on double pay. Of course Mr. Bates indignantly rejected such an offer. Agnes had long since left the mill.

"Confound those paupers!" muttered Bent savagely. "They are as high and mighty as the king. They must be tamed, and I will do it. I will conquer that defiant little minx yet, or I will sacrifice my fortune. She shall be my wife. I swear it!"

With this vow, Bent at once set at work to carry out a villainous scheme. In the consummation of his ends, he would stoop to any depth of infamy, and resort to any deed of crime.

He had sworn to win Agnes Bates, by fair means or foul, and from that moment his whole black soul was engrossed in the accomplishment of his object.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

With the loss of his position by Mr. Bates, the resources of the little family were badly crippled. For years the poor man had struggled with ill health and poverty. His pay as night watchman had sufficed to support them while it lasted, but now that it was gone starvation even seemed to face them.

Agnes was brave and hopeful, and did much to cheer her depressed parents.

"There is always a way provided," she declared cheerfully. "We will hope for the best."

She had, with Sam's aid, secured a small position in a millinery establishment, and daily went to her work.

The pay was small, but it contributed materially to the keeping of the wolf from the door. Thus matters went on for some while, Mr. Bates vainly looking for a situation.

Still Alarm Sam was a frequent visitor, and stood a real friend to the family.

More than an ordinary degree of liking had sprung up between him and Agnes. They were often together, and very happy in each other's society.

Nothing had been seen or heard of Royal Bent for a long time. The villain seemed to have abandoned his suit with Agnes.

Sam was congratulating himself upon his good fortune, when a dire calamity descended upon the Bates family like a bolt from a clear sky.

At least three nights in the week Agnes was compelled to remain at her work until about nine o'clock in the evening. As a general thing Sam happened along conveniently and escorted the young girl to her home.

But there were times, particularly when called away to a fire, that Sam could not be on hand.

One of the streets through which Agnes was obliged to pass was quite poorly lighted and unfrequented at that hour. She ever felt a little timid in passing through this street alone.

Upon the present night she had left the store at the usual hour. Sam, unfortunately, was not on hand. There had been a small blaze in the western part of the city, and he was re-

turning home at the hour of midnight, when near the engine house a man ran out into the street and grasped his arm.

He was pallid and trembling, and fearfully excited.

"Oh, Sam!" he cried in hoarse tones. "I fear that something dreadful has happened to Agnes."

It was Hiram Bates. The young fireman dropped out of the ranks of the fire company and sprang to the sidewalk, followed by Bates.

In that moment Sam's whole being was on fire.

"What is that, Mr. Bates?" he exclaimed sharply. "What do you tell me of Agnes?"

"Oh, I fear harm has come to her!"

"In what manner?"

"Oh, I know not! She has not come home from work. I went down to the millinery store, but she left there at ^{at} nine o'clock."

Sam's brain reeled.

"My God!" he gasped. "The blow has come! That which I feared has happened."

A chaotic set of ideas and theories coursed madly through his brain. What should be done?

He knew well enough whose work it was. Without a doubt it was a scheme of abduction, and Royal Bent was the villain at the bottom of all.

"Have you notified the police?" asked Sam wildly.

"Not as yet."

"That, then, is the first thing we must do," cried the young fireman. "Come with me. We will raise heaven and earth to save her."

Down the street Sam wildly ran. He dashed into the police station, and hurriedly stated the case to the chief.

In a few moments officers were dispatched to scour the city from one end to the other.

The report spread even at that late hour, and many citizens joined in the quest.

It was morning, however, before a tangible clew was secured. Then two men were found who told a thrilling story.

They were, at the hour of nine, coming through a dark street, in fact the street Agnes usually passed through, when they heard the sounds of a scuffle and a faint scream.

Rushing forward they were just in time to see two men with muffled features dragging a young girl into a close carriage.

Before they could do aught to rescue her she was forced to enter, and the carriage was driven away at top speed. This was the story as rendered truthfully.

That the young girl was Agnes Bates there was not the least particle of doubt. Who her abductors were was the next question. In Sam Weldon's mind there was not the least doubt, though he kept the matter to himself.

Daylight came, and the morning papers informed the whole town of the mysterious fate of Agnes Bates.

Public sentiment was aroused, and everybody turned out to search for the kidnappers. The parents of the missing girl were in a frenzied state of mind. But Sam Weldon was calm and determined. He went to work in a methodical and resolute way.

There was not the slightest doubt in his mind but that Royal Bent was at the bottom of the villainy.

Accordingly, he adopted a bold and original plan. Without hesitation he went directly to the Sinclair mansion, and called upon Mr. Bent.

He was shown into the reception room by a servant. A few moments later he was face to face with his foe.

Bent looked his astonishment as he saw that his visitor was Sam Weldon; but he quickly recovered, and said coolly:

"Ah, Mr. Weldon, how do you do? To what am I indebted for this visit?"

Sam looked straight and penetratingly at the villain. There was no fear or compromise in his keen gaze.

"Royal Bent," he said in a voice of steel, "there is no use of mincing matters. You know what I am here for."

The villain affected surprise.

"I shall know better when you have explained yourself," he declared evasively.

"If necessary, then, I will explain. I want to know what you have done with Agnes Bates?"

Ben recoiled, and his face became as black as a thunder cloud. He glared at the young fireman wolfishly.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed angrily. "What should I know of that girl? She does not interest me in the least. It is not stealing the daughters of paupers in these days."

"Take care! Do not insult the young lady in my presence," cried Sam sternly. "Once more I demand of you that you restore Agnes Bates to her home."

"Now you have gone far enough!" cried the villain threateningly. "I am not responsible for Agnes Bates, or anybody else of her class. If you have nothing more to say to me I invite you to leave my house."

Sam only smiled contemptuously.

"I am going to give you a warning, Mr. Royal Bent," he said calmly. "And you will do well to heed it. Don't forget that murder will out, and the man whose soul is blackened with crime can never know prosperity. The law is close upon you. Beware!"

Bent's face was livid. He staggered back, and a bitter curse dropped from his lips.

"Hold! What do you mean?" he thundered. "Stop! You shall explain to me, or, by heaven, you shall die!"

The villain took a step across the room. A dagger glistened in his hand. His face wore the expression of a fiend incarnate.

But Sam Weldon's right hand held a revolver.

"Stand away from that door, you coward!" he said sternly. "Whenever I meet you in the future I shall be prepared for you. I mean to go from this house alive. It may take weeks, perhaps years, but I shall live to avenge the people you have so vilely wronged."

Sam advanced toward the door. The pistol covered Bent, and he retreated; but there was murder in his evil glance, and Sam did not turn his back until he was well out of the house and assured of safety.

CHAPTER XII.

A DARK VISITOR.

It had been at the expense of no small amount of nerve that Sam had thus bearded the lion in his den.

From that moment war was declared between himself and Royal Bent. It was a strife which could never be amicably settled, and could only end in death.

But Still Alarm Sam was not the one to place a special value on life where duty called. He was determined to bring Royal Bent to the wall at any cost.

After leaving the Sinclair mansion he made his way back to the engine house buried in deep thought.

He wondered much where the hiding place was in which Bent had placed Agnes. His whole being tingled as he thought of the young girl in the power of the villain.

She must be rescued, but how? Ah, here was a problem not easy of solution.

It would do no good to openly accuse the villain and send an

officer to his house to search it. It was hardly likely that Agnes was confined there.

But if evidence could be procured of his guilt it would be easy enough to put the villain in prison until he was forced to yield up his prisoner.

To get this evidence was now Sam's resolve. He lost no time in formulating a plan of action.

First, he obtained leave of absence from the fire company for a few weeks. Then he took the cars for a small town just below Norton.

There he registered at a hotel. In his room he proceeded to don a disguise in which he was to completely bury his identity.

He succeeded well, for when he emerged from the hotel he was in no way recognizable as the man who had entered it.

In this disguise he took the cars back to Norton the same day.

And now followed some amusing experiences. He met his dearest friends, who passed him by without the least sign of recognition. His disguise was complete.

Satisfied of this, Sam now began operations.

He visited the Sinclair mansion, and applied for a position as butler or lackey. As it happened, the butler who had been in Bent's employ had quarreled with his employer and left. This was Sam's chance.

He played his part so well that he was employed by Bent, and at once began his duties as servant in the household which held so many important secrets which he desired to know.

It was a distasteful task to Sam to obey the commands of the villain whom he so thoroughly detested.

But he knew that if he persevered he was certain to win his reward. To rescue Agnes he would make even the sacrifice of his life.

It required but a brief experience in his new position for Sam to learn many disgusting things regarding the management of Bent's household.

The villain had many filthy habits, being addicted to the uses of liquor and opium.

While under the influence of the drug he was generally very savage and murderous. At such times he locked himself up in his room and remained there for a day at a time.

Sam used every endeavor to get a trace of the place of confinement of Agnes Bates. Never dreaming that it might be in the near vicinity, he always tracked Bent whenever he left the house to make a distant excursion.

Thus several days passed without incidents worthy of special note, when one evening a series of startling events broke the monotony of the household.

Sam, in his capacity of butler, was called to the door by a ring of the bell. He opened the door to see a tall man with a dark cloak and a slouch hat concealing his features standing upon the steps.

Sam experienced a peculiar thrill, and tried to get a glimpse of the stranger's face.

"Is Mr. Royal Bent at home?" was the query, in a rasping voice.

"Yes, sir," replied Sam. "Walk in. I will take your card."

"No," replied the dark stranger, as he crossed the threshold, "I have no card. Only tell him an old friend wants to see him. He will know who it is."

Sam was baffled in his attempt to get the stranger's name. However, he went to Bent's room and announced the visitor.

The effect upon the villain was most peculiar. He gave a start, and his face turned livid in hue.

"Is he a tall, dark-complexioned chap, Henry?" he asked.

"He is, sir," replied Sam.

"The devil!" exclaimed Bent sourly.

"Indeed, sir, it may be," returned Sam, with a scrape. "He is dark enough for that, sir."

At this Bent laughed uproariously. But Sam had gained an important point. In his inner mind he was shrewd enough to perceive that this dark visitor was one whom Bent dreaded.

Not as a foe, evidently, but as a dangerous colleague. Dangerous because possibly treacherous. Sam was quite an adept at character reading.

A suspicion crossed his mind as to the real identity of the visitor. He kept cool, however, until Bent dismissed him.

"Let his satanic majesty wait in the reception room," he commanded. "Tell him I will come right down."

Sam went down and obsequiously made this announcement to the visitor. Then he resolved upon a daring game.

Between the visitor's seat and the door was a high screen. Sam opened the door and closed it, but did not leave the room. Instead, he slipped behind the screen.

In a few moments the door opened, and Royal Bent entered the room.

Sam experienced a thrill.

"Ah!" exclaimed Bent in a hoarse voice. "My servant said the devil was waiting to see me down here, and I vow he was not far wrong. But we won't talk about that. What in the fiend's name do you want?"

"Can you ask me that?"

"Money, eh?"

"Of course. How am I to get along without it? You owe it to me."

"Do I? I don't exactly see it. You were working for revenge, not to serve me."

"Did I not do as you wanted?"

"Yes, indirectly. Well, we won't quarrel about that, Bud. Wait a moment and I'll fetch out some wine."

Sam Weldon experienced a strange sensation. The visitor was really as he suspected, the executor of the vendetta, the son of Paoli Rossi, and the murderer of Morton Sinclair! It was a moment of thrilling sort.

CHAPTER XIII.

A THRILLING INTERVIEW.

Still Alarm Sam was not unmindful of the perils of his position.

His place of concealment behind the screen was not of the safest. He was in the room with two murderers, who would not hesitate to take his life.

Yet he did not experience fear. He was cool, calm and shrewd.

Bent went to a sideboard and took down a bottle of wine.

"Yes, I suppose you are short of money, Bud," he said cheerfully, "and I'll have to supply you; but make yourself at home. Here is some fine old Madeira wine."

Ross sank into a chair by a table, while Bent poured the wine from the bottle. When he finished decanting it, Bent sat opposite his pal.

Ross raised the wine-glass, and drained it. The hot liquor seemed to warm him, and his savage humor relaxed.

"Of course I've got to have some money," he said sharply. "There's no reason why you should refuse me. I have put you where you are. Isn't that so?"

"I will admit it," agreed Bent. "Yet in that you furthered your own ends."

"I accomplished the vendetta of a generation," declared the Corsican. "I am now freed from those vows which our people held so sacred."

"Sacred or not," said Bent, "the vendetta is not recognized in this country. It is considered murder here, and you'd hang for it if caught."

"Sh! Curse you! Don't mention that matter again. You can't tell what listening ears might be about."

"Pshaw! There is no danger here. We are perfectly safe."

"Perhaps so. I don't trust anybody nor anything," averred the Corsican. "I tell you, Bent, you wouldn't want that hunted feeling over you for long."

"Nonsense! Your nerves are weak. Take some more of the wine."

Ross nervously complied. The liquor was now mounting to his brain and endowing him with a false courage.

"Success is ours!" he cried, with flushed face. "Old Sinclair is out of the way. The mills are yours, and—but what about that chit of a girl?"

"She is in my power," said Bent, with accents of triumph.

Sam, in his hiding place, felt his veins tingle. So excited was he that he came near betraying himself. Truly he was learning important facts. Fortune was on his side.

He knew now positively that Bud Ross was the murderer of Mr. Sinclair. Also, that Agnes Bates was in the power of Royal Bent.

He was fully decided in regard to a plan of action. He would call the police, and have these two arch-scoundrels captured. It would be bagging two birds with one shot. But fascination held him a listener for some moments longer.

"The deuce!" exclaimed Ross, contemptuously. "I gave you credit for more sense, Bent. Don't you know that you are meddling with fire? Women are bad things to fool with. They will ruin a man sooner or later."

"I'll risk it," rejoined Bent carelessly. "I don't intend she shall make a fool of me."

"All right," exclaimed Ross gruffly. "Do as you're a mind to. Take my advice and let her alone. But this ain't business. I've got to leave the country, and you and I might as well settle up."

"Where are you going?"

"I am going to Corsica. Of course I have lived in America so long that you'd hardly take me for an Italian, but I mean to spend the rest of my life in the land of my nativity."

"A wise idea," rejoined Bent.

"Well, come let's settle up!"

"Very well. How much money do you want?"

"One hundred thousand dollars."

Bent drew back and gave vent to a long, low whistle. He gazed at Ross for a moment in amazement.

"Whew!" ejaculated. "Are you crazy?"

"Eh?" exclaimed Ross.

"Your demands are modest."

"Modest!" roared the murderer savagely. "What do you mean? Am I not entitled to the lion's share of the spoils?"

"Well, that's cool," retorted Bent. "You really are entitled to nothing."

Ross seemed dumfounded. He glared at the other like a wild beast. Then a savage oath escaped his lips.

"By the gods of war!" he cried madly. "Dare you make such an assertion to me as that? Did I not do the work?"

"Stop a moment," said Bent imperturbably. "Did you not execute your oath of vendetta in killing Sinclair? Was not that your purpose?"

"Thunder!" roared Ross furiously. "Was it not that act which gave you all this wealth?"

"Is it not mine by lawful inheritance? What part of it belongs to you?"

Ross seemed stunned for a moment. He glared wolfishly at Bent.

"Then you don't mean to settle with me?" he asked in an angry tone.

"I mean to settle with you for a reasonable amount; but there is no compulsion about it. Nothing more than a motive of generosity."

Ross drew back a step or two. There was a maddened glare in his eyes. His voice was hoarse and strained.

"I always suspected you of treachery, you cur," he hissed.

"Now I know it; but you need not imagine that you can safely browbeat me. You will meet my demands or I'll have your heart."

A knife gleamed in Ross's hand. But Bent was prepared. A revolver was in his own grasp, and he covered the murderer.

"Stand back!" he said threateningly. "You can't bluff me, Bud. You must talk sense."

Matters had clearly reached a crisis. Still Alarm Sam, in his hiding place, was quick to see this, and he knew that the time for action had come.

His position was such that the screen could easily conceal his exit by the door. Swift as a flash he opened it and darted out.

The slight creak of the door arrested what might have been a deadly conflict between the two villains. Ross gave a gasping cry, and retreated to the far end of the room.

An eavesdropper!" he cried. "We are spotted!"

Bent sprang back of the screen. Nobody was there. He flung open the door. Forgotten was their feud by the two villains in that moment of mutual peril.

A savage curse escaped Bent's lips, as he turned back into the room.

"I'll wager that it was some one of the servants," he gritted. "I'd like to know how much he heard. If he heard all I'll slit the sneak's windpipe for him!"

Ross was in a state of panic and alarm. With cold perspiration oozing from every pore he came forward.

"I've got to get out of here," he said nervously; "but before I go I want to know if you mean to settle with me."

"Of course I'll settle with you," replied Bent.

"For how much?"

"I'll give you ten thousand dollars."

A savage curse escaped Ross.

"You'll give me one hundred thousand or nothing!" he gritted. "Understand it, I want the money this week. There's no fooling about it. If you don't—"

Ross made a significant motion across his throat. Bent laughed contemptuously. Before he could say anything, however, Ross gave a cry of alarm and glided into an adjoining room.

He was none too soon, for the tramp of feet was heard in the hall, the door burst open, and several police officers rushed into the room.

The scene which followed was a most exciting one.

CHAPTER XIV.

EXCITING INCIDENTS.

Of course Still Alarm Sam was responsible for the arrival of the police. He rushed in with the officers, and Bent, catching sight of him, turned livid in countenance.

The villain then knew that his butler had been behind the scenes all the time, and had overheard the whole of his controversy with Ross.

For a moment Royal Bent saw his plans tumbling in ruin about his ears.

But an incident served to enable him to collect his senses, and a wonderful tact brought him face to face with the situation.

Sam had worked his game shrewdly. He had foreseen the exigency of Ross giving them the slip, and had so provided for it as not to disprove his own sincerity.

His aim was to first catch Ross. Then it would be easy enough to denounce Bent.

He had very shrewdly not apprised the officer of the true facts of the case. He had simply intimated to them that his master was being assaulted by a man named Ross.

Accordingly, as the officers entered, he cried:

"This is the room, boys! Now, catch the omadhoun and lock him up! He's gone into the other room! Oh, ye'll catch him sure!"

Then he ran up to Bent, crying:

"Shure, masther, it's safe yes are! I was afraid that the vilyun would kill ye intoirely."

In an instant Bent was himself again. He had, as he supposed, at once grasped the situation.

He regarded Sam as a thick-headed fellow, who had unconsciously played eavesdropper, and who was not capable of understanding the conversation between him and Ross, but who had summoned the police because he imagined that his master's life was threatened.

Mentally Bent cursed, and then rejoiced in the apparent stupidity of his butler.

Sam, on the other hand, congratulated himself on the successful hoodwinking of the villain.

But the officers did not capture Ross. The villain escaped by means of a fire escape. Sam pretended to be much concerned about his master's safety.

"Shure, I thought it was kilt intoirely yez would be!" he cried excitedly. "Did I do right in bringing the perlice, sor?"

"No," growled Bent. "There was no necessity for that. The fellow could do me no harm."

"What are the facts, sir?" asked the police captain, when it had become assured that Ross had escaped. "Were you assaulted?"

"Not at all."

"Your servant asserts that you were."

"Servant be hanged!" cried Bent angrily. "He is a fool. If he had been attending to his own business instead of playing eavesdropper—"

"Shure, masther, it was all so unintentional!" cried Sam, affecting innocence. "I was behind the screen, so that I moight help yez if the vilyun did ye harrum."

"Well, if I catch you at such a trick again I'll break your rascally back!" cried Bent angrily. "Get out of the room. I've a mind to discharge you."

"But we understand that this visitor of yours was Ross, the incendiary," intimated the police captain. "If he was guilty of no crime, why did he attempt flight so precipitately when we came in?"

Bent changed color.

"I don't know who the cuss was," he growled. "He came in here to jew me out of some money. I should have had him ejected as it was. His name might have been Ross or Goss, for all I know or care. He isn't here now, that's all. I don't want to be bothered again by such a visitor."

"But if he is Ross," persisted the police captain, "he is a criminal of note, and we would like to capture him. Can you give us no clew?"

"None whatever."

"Very well, sir," said the police captain, turning to the door. "This is an affair of singular aspects. We shall keep a close watch of your house in the future, sir, to make sure that you are troubled by no more such visitors."

Bent disregarded the officer's sarcasm. When the police had gone he paced the floor in a peculiar frame of mind.

He pulled the bell suddenly. Sam appeared in answer.

"James, I want to talk with you," he said curtly. "Sit down there by the table."

Sam obeyed. Bent then quickly locked the door.

"Now," he said, facing the pseudo butler, "I want to talk

with you, you prying scoundrel. Don't dare to equivocate, but tell me how much you know."

Bent's glittering gaze was upon Sam, and pierced him through and through. The young fireman felt that he was perilously near exposure.

"Shure, sor, what do yez mean?" he asked, assuming simplicity.

"You know what I mean."

"How should I, sor?"

"Didn't you overhear every word of that conversation this afternoon, sir?"

"Shure, I did, sor."

"Well, that's the idea. You know what we were talking about, don't you?"

"I know that yez came moighty near having a scrap, sor. I was afraid yez wud get the wust of it."

Bent gave an exclamation of impatience. He went up to Sam, and said:

"No fooling now, James. You are not so thick-headed as you appear."

"Thank ye, sor."

"I want to know what you overheard us say?"

Sam affected an expression of comprehension. He was playing his part admirably.

"Oh, that's phwat yez are driving at," he cried. "Shure, an' I'm not the kind of a sarvant what tells tales out of school, sor."

A fiendish light shone in Bent's eyes. This was a practical admission that his butler had really heard all, and comprehended it, too.

The question was now, what sort of a man was he? Could he be trusted with these mighty secrets which he had overheard? Inwardly Bent believed that it would be fatal to permit any living man to retain possession of them.

The villain's mind was busily at work revolving different plans over and over.

All the while he kept a close scrutiny of Sam's face. This proved a fatal thing for the pseudo butler.

Sam's disguise had hitherto been infallible. Now, however, unfortunately one corner of the fringe of beard which extended around under his chin became slightly detached.

At a distance this would have been unnoticed; but at such close quarters, and under such a searching scrutiny, it was easily discernible.

Royal Bent gave a slight start at sight of it. Instantly his worst fears found realization.

A sharp cry escaped his lips. Swift as a flash he grasped the false whiskers, and off they came.

Sam sprang up, and stood revealed before him. It was a dramatic tableau, which seldom finds a counterpart in real life.

"Ha! I thought something was wrong about this!" cried Bent fiercely. "It is you, Sam Weldon, and this is your trick! Now you are unmasked!"

Sam confronted the villain, coolly and calmly. He was conscious that, although exposed, he had the best of the situation.

"Yes, Royal Bent, it is I," he said scathingly; "and I have lived long enough beneath this roof to gather evidence of your guilty relations with the fiend who murdered your uncle, Morton Sinclair. Tremble, Royal Bent, for I have you in my power."

And the villain did tremble with a mortal terror. He turned ghastly white, but endeavored to brave the situation out.

"You have no evidence against me!" he cried, with bravado. "You can convict me of nothing!"

"It is not my purpose to deliver you up to the law yet," said

the young fireman steadily. "I am not yet ready. When you go to the scaffold I want you to accompany Bud Ross."

A maddened cry escaped Bent's lips, and he drew a revolver.

CHAPTER XV.

THE STILL ALARM.

"Curse you!" he yelled. "I will teach you that you cannot cross my path and live. If I go to the scaffold let it be, then, for ridding my path of you!"

Only quick action on Sam's part at that moment saved his life. He sprang forward and gripped the villain's wrist.

The revolver exploded, but the ball lodged in the ceiling. The next instant Sam had wrested the weapon from his adversary and flung it across the room.

But Bent was savage, and disposed to fight. He closed with Sam, and a desultory struggle followed.

For a few moments it was hard to tell which had the worst of it. Now one was down, and then the other, and in this manner they struggled for some time.

Then Sam suddenly got the upper hold, and forced his foe to the floor.

There he held him pinioned. Bent ceased struggling, and was at Sam's mercy.

The young fireman was cool and determined.

"Royal Bent," he said sternly, "I have you at my mercy. If I was to take your life the world would be rid of a monster; but you need not tremble. I do not want your blood upon my conscience."

"What are you going to do?" asked the villain craftily.

"I want you to truthfully answer a question I shall ask."

"What is it?"

"Where is Agnes Bates?"

The villain leered insolently.

"That you will never know," he gritted. "You can kill me but I'll never tell you."

"May Heaven have mercy on your cowardly soul if you have done her harm," said the young fireman impressively.

"She has promised to become my wife," declared the villain. Sam's face flushed hotly.

"Liar!" he cried.

"You shall see."

The temptation was powerful upon the young fireman at that moment to kill the writhing villain as he would an obnoxious reptile.

But the thought occurred to him that it was, after all, a human life, and the idea was so repulsive it restrained him.

He relaxed his hold upon the villain. He knew that he had no weapon, and could do him no harm, so he permitted him to arise.

An honorable man would have thanked an adversary for thus sparing him; but Royal Bent's craven soul was beneath such an expression as this.

He retreated to another corner of the room and glared at Sam vengefully.

"I mean to rescue Agnes Bates from your clutches," declared the young fireman firmly. "And before I leave your track, Royal Bent, you shall have expiated all your wretched crimes. But I am not yet ready to strike. Will you unlock the door?"

"So you aren't ready to strike, eh?" sneered the villain. "Remember, I can strike also. I would advise you not to delay, for victory belongs to the man who strikes first."

"If you will unlock that door I will take my departure," said Sam quietly.

Bent hesitated. He would gladly have availed himself of

some opportunity to do his foe injury, but there was no chance. Reflection decided him.

He advanced to the door and unlocked it.

"You may go this time," he said, with a leer; "but the next time—beware!"

Sam unheeded this remark, and passed out. A moment later he was upon the street. He took a look at the house as he went out.

"There is no possibility that Agnes is held a captive there," he mentally concluded. "I have been several days under that roof, and ought to have discovered her if such was a fact. I wonder where the villain has her secreted? It must be my first move to learn."

It was possible that Sam might have profited by making one bold stroke and placing Bent under arrest. But without the capture of Ross also, it would be a difficult matter to furnish other than circumstantial evidence of the villain's complicity with Ross.

It could not as yet be proved that he was the abductor of Agnes Bates. Little would be gained, therefore, by arresting the villain.

Sam did not for a moment lose sight of the fact that he was playing a difficult game with dangerous forces; but Ross was the acme of villainy and deceit, and shrewd enough to outwit the keenest of foes.

Now that he had openly showed his hand to Bent, Sam became well assured that his life would be sought by the foe. Yet this did not daunt him.

He yet clung to the belief that his safest and wisest course was to keep low, and fight the battle out by strategic moves. Thus decided, he went downtown to the engine house and resumed his duties.

But he kept in close communication with the police, and a close surveillance of Bent's house was maintained.

Ross had eluded the officers in his usual skillful manner.

Report had it that he had quit the region forever, but this was far from the truth. It was disproved to Bent when he received the following one day:

"Royal Bent:—I want to know if you are going to fork over that hundred thousand. If you don't you know what it is to make an enemy of me. I'll make life miserable for you. Answer at once, for I want to go across the big pond and open up business in Monaco. Yours truly, Bud Ross."

Bent gritted his teeth, and flung the epistle into the fire.

"Perhaps Bud thinks I am a fool," he muttered. "He isn't entitled to any part of the money. It's mine justly. He don't want to fool with me too much, either, or I'll make life miserable for him."

The spirit was infused into the letter which Bent returned to Ross, offering him again the "gift" of ten thousand dollars.

"That's the last I will do," he muttered. "He can take it or nothing."

In this course Bent had not consulted policy or discretion. He instantly transformed Ross from an ally into an implacable foe. Revenge was one of the Corsican's attributes.

The mills had been running on full time under the new management. Bent seemed fully capable in his new line of business. He was not popular, yet prospered.

But an hour of reverses was at hand. Villainy never yet flourished unless for a period, and Bent's case was no exception.

One night Sam Weldon heard once more the clickety-click of the still alarm indicator near his cot in the engine room. As he sprang up he saw that the box was No. 60.

A premonition was upon him, and he cried:

"The Sinclair Mills, I will stake my life! Up, boys! There's work for us to-night!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A FEARFUL BLOW.

Still Alarm Sam slid down to the floor below. The permanent men of the company were prompt in following him.

The doors of the engine house were thrown open, and the cry came in from the street:

"Fire! Fire!"

Sam knew well enough that it was the Sinclair Mills. A still alarm from that box would mean nothing else.

Out into the street dashed the ladders of No. 6 with a cheer and a rush. The long, hard run to the fire was begun.

Up one street and down another they ran with full speed. Soon they came in sight of the burning mills.

And it was a sight most thrilling to behold! The flames were leaping from the second story of the mills, and were well under way.

No. 6 was the first fire company on the spot when a man with staggering tread and blood-stained features came up to him.

"Sam, I'm pretty near done for. Of course I don't work in the mill now, but I got on to the incendiaries' game, and came down here to spoil it. I got badly used up, as you see."

"Hiram Bates!" gasped Sam, as he recognized the erstwhile watchman.

"That's my name," replied the ex-watchman. "You'd hardly know me, would you?"

"What happened to you?"

"It's quite a story; but I'll make it short. About two hours ago I was on my way home, when I saw two men prowling about the mill yard. I suspected that they were incendiaries, and started to give the alarm; but on second thought I changed my mind and went to trailing them about."

"Well, just after twelve I lost track of them. I'd thought of telling Jim Martin, who took my place as watchman, but before I could find him I heard cries for help. I rushed into the yard, and the two incendiaries were pounding Jim into insensibility. I saw them crush his skull in, then I tussled with them."

"They downed me, and I reckon they'd have killed me, but I managed to get away from them. When I called for help they ran. But the mills were already burning, and I had just time to ring in the still alarm."

Hiram Bates staggered to a seat on the sidewalk near. Sam listened to his story with tingling veins.

"Did you recognize the incendiaries?" he asked.

"One on 'em was that rascally bookkeeper, Bud Ross."

"I thought so!" exclaimed Sam. "It is his revenge upon Royal Bent. Well, keep quiet and easy for a little while, Mr. Bates. My attention is required here just now. I will look out for you later."

"That is all right, my boy!" cried Bates. "Go to your duty. Don't mind me; I'm all right."

Sam dashed away, and was soon engaged in the work of directing the firemen how to conquer the flames.

Other companies now began to arrive, and streams of water were quickly upon the flames.

The whole town was aroused. But the owner of the valuable property, Mr. Royal Bent, was conspicuous by his absence.

This seemed strange, inasmuch as it was well known that he was at his home but a short distance away.

One well-disposed citizen thought that information should be conveyed to him, so went to his house with the alarm. To his horror and amazement he learned from the servants that

Bent had been upon a prolonged spree, and was in a drunken stupor from which he could not be aroused.

The incendiary had struck his vengeful blow at just the right moment. Upon his awakening from the drunken slumber Bent would find himself confronted with an appalling realization.

At the fire no braver fight was ever placed on record than that made by the fire boys of Norton.

Still Alarm Sam seemed everywhere at all times, and particularly at a critical juncture. His brave work was an inspiration to the others.

Now he was up a ladder directing the course of a new stream of water. Again he was on the roof, or cutting his way into the mill to get a more advantageous position.

The battle was conducted on a skillful and scientific principle. But for a number of things which baffled the bravest effort, the fire boys would have scored a great victory.

The incendiary had done his work thoroughly. But Ross had meant to strike a blow which this time should be felt.

With consummate cunning he had caused the firing of the mills in at least twenty different quarters. The entire fire department of Norton was not adequate for such a task.

While conquering the flames in one section, they were only bursting forth more fiercely in another. And so the desultory battle went on.

All night the flames were in turn subdued and rampant. Time and again they were gotten under control, only to burst forth again with fresh fury.

The fire boys had worked until the stupor of exhaustion was upon many of them. But it soon became evident that it was beyond human power to save the Sinclair Mills.

This time the incendiary had triumphed. It was a dark hour for Norton.

People stood with sinking hearts and watched the work of destruction which no human power could avert.

Gradually the fire gutted the noble buildings, consuming the valuable machinery and leaving the walls to crumble and fall to complete the ruin.

It was a sad spectacle, and many turned away sick at heart. Others watched with dread fascination.

The major part of Norton's population depended upon the mills for support. Hundreds would be thrown out of employment now.

Had Mr. Sinclair been alive there would have been a different feeling. People would have had confidence in his ability to remedy the mishap; but Royal Bent had not the trust of the people. He had not even their respect.

By daybreak the sad final came. The noble mills of Norton, the pride of that industrious section, covering acres of ground, so magnificent was their extent, were in ashes.

It was a fearful blow to the town of Norton, as well as to the owner, Royal Bent.

The latter knew nothing about it until the next day. Then he came out of his debauched slumber to be confronted with an appalling realization.

The effect upon him was intense and singular.

At first he seemed petrified. Then anger contorted his visage, and he fouled the air about him with curses most frightful to hear.

"I'll follow Bud Ross for this!" he raved. "I'll wring his heart for it. Revenge, eh? Well, I'll show him how to wreak revenge! I'll have his life!"

Not one stone was left upon another, comparatively speaking, of the Sinclair Mills. Bent suffered himself to be driven down to the scene of the destruction that day.

He viewed the ruins, and then, still raving madly, went back home. The newspapers soon contained advertisements of a heavy reward for the incendiaries.

For a few days Bent was furious in his efforts to capture the incendiaries. Then a reaction set in.

Whether it was remorse for his past conduct or the appalling force of the sense of doom which hung over him, it would not be easy to estimate, but he relapsed into another spell of debauchery.

He held a high carousal at his palatial home, and for days lay in a drunken stupor. He was fast paving the way to that ruinous end which ever overtakes the evil doer.

CHAPTER XVII.

A TURN IN SAM'S AFFAIRS.

The result of the loss of the Sinclair Mills was to create much distress and financial stricture in Norton.

As nothing had been said by Bent about rebuilding the mills, there was a strong fear that he would not do so, and a panicky feeling prevailed.

Many people began to make preparations for emigration. Others could not accept this alternative, for they had not a penny with which to accomplish the move.

With this state of affairs in existence, there was of necessity much suffering, and even danger of actual starvation.

Those were dark days for the beautiful little town of Norton. And nobody felt worse than Still Alarm Sam. He loved the associations of the place, and could not bear to see it go back.

Yet he seemed powerless to avert the situation. He was a poor lad himself, and devoid of money or influence.

Thus matters went on for a time. The most strenuous efforts had been made to capture the incendiaries, but they were shrewd enough to give the detectives the slip.

After a time a committee of citizens saw fit to wait upon Bent and approach him upon the matter of rebuilding the mills. An evasive answer was all the satisfaction they received.

"If I feel like it I shall rebuild," Bent declared, when further pressed. "It is my business and nobody else's. Let that end it."

It was not long after this before a dark rumor found circulation in Norton.

It began to be whispered about that Bent would never rebuild, for the fact that he would never be able to.

Report had it that he lacked the necessary capital.

Not that Morton Sinclair had not left plenty of money; but Bent had got away with it in a summary manner.

There were thrilling rumors of heavy losses at the gaming table; in one case, of fifty thousand dollars in one night. There was no doubt but that Royal Bent was on the downward path.

Creditors now began to clamor for their money. Bent's house was besieged by dozens of tradesmen and other victims of the villain's extravagance.

All hope was lost that Royal Bent would rebuild the big mills. The people of Norton became downcast, and the little city began to rapidly depopulate.

Even Still Alarm Sam began to consider the advisability of leaving—not from choice, but from the sheerest necessity.

He was a young man, and yet had his way to make in the world. In his extremity he met Hiram Bates and told him of his circumstances.

"There is no doubt," he said bitterly, "but that it is the villainy of Royal Bent that has brought distress upon Norton. It will be hard for me to leave this town, where I have been so happy, but necessity seems to demand it."

Hiram Bates shook his head.

"No, Sam!" he cried. "You're not to think of that. The town of Norton cannot spare you."

There was a pleased light in Sam's eyes.

"I have many kind friends in Norton," he said.

"Yes, and it would pain them to have you leave, Sam. Only hold on a little while longer. There will surely be a chance for the better before long."

"I wish I might be assured of that," said Sam drearily.

"I feel sure of it. Indeed, Sam, if I only knew that Agnes was once more at home, safe and well, I think I would laugh all my other troubles to scorn."

Sam indulged in a shiver.

"It is strange where the villain has hidden her away!" he exclaimed. "I can get no clew."

"At times I am tempted to visit and openly accuse him."

"No," declared Sam, "that would not be wise. We would gain nothing by such a move. Patience and steady work will win the game."

"I hope you are right, my boy."

"But why was I born penniless?" said Sam, as he paced up and down. "Now, if I only had money enough, how quickly I would rebuild the mills!"

Hiram Bates gave a violent start.

"Haven't you any wealthy relatives, Sam?" he asked.

"What good would that do me?" asked the young fireman abruptly.

"Well, considerable good, if they were to die and leave you a fat pile."

Sam gave a start.

"I have heard of my uncle in New York," he said slowly. "My father has told me of his vast wealth; but that uncle never would help me."

"Why not?"

"I doubt if he knows that I am in existence."

"Or if he should die——"

"He would probably will all his money to some charitable institution before he would think of me."

"Ah! But supposing he dies intestate?"

Sam turned upon Bates.

"What are you driving at?" he asked shortly.

The ex-watchman was so eager and excited that he trembled like an aspen.

"I could hardly believe it was the same," he said; "and yet it may be. You say you have a wealthy uncle in New York. What was your father's full name?"

"Hiram Weldon."

"Ah! Was he ever a fireman?"

"Yes, at one time he was chief of a fire company in New York City."

"It is the same!" muttered Bates excitedly.

Sam at that moment fancied the ex-watchman crazy. But Bates drew a newspaper from his pocket, and indicated a paragraph for Sam to read. All the color faded from the young man's face, as he read:

"Information Wanted:—If this is seen by Hiram Weldon, once Chief of the Mazeppa Fire Company of New York City, or any of his descendants, something of great value will be learned by addressing Howes & Hurd, Att'ys-at-Law, No. — Broadway, N. Y."

"Why, that calls for my father!" gasped Sam. "I wonder what it means?"

"Sam," said Bates emphatically, "you go right to the telegraph office and answer that at once. It's two to one that your rich uncle is dead."

Sam's brain swam with the mere thought of such a thing. For a moment he was dazed.

Then he decided to accept the advice.

"Mr. Bates," he said, with an effort, "I thank you for calling my attention to this. I might never have known of it but for you."

"That's nothing, my boy!" cried the bluff ex-watchman. "I hope you're the heir to a million. It would be the happiest day of my life."

Sam hastened at once to a telegraph office.

He hastily indited a dispatch to Howes & Hurd, the lawyers in New York. A reply came back as follows:

"Sam Weldon:—Glad to hear from you. Our Mr. Ward will come to Norton to-morrow to see you. Please meet him at evening train. Yours, etc.,
Howes & Hurd."

Of course Sam was on hand at the evening train. As it rolled up to the station platform a man alighted, whom Sam at once singled out as his man.

He was short and business-like, and well dressed. As if by intuition, he came at once up to Sam.

"Mr. Weldon?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Sam. "Are you Mr. Ward?"

"I am," was the reply.

"I am very glad to see you," said Sam, sincerely, as he took the other's hand.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WINDFALL OF LUCK.

Sam had hired a room at the hotel, and he proceeded to show Mr. Ward thither.

The lawyer's proxy was not slow in approaching the matter on hand. He threw aside his coat and hat when they reached the hotel, and said:

"Well, now, perhaps, Mr. Weldon, you can satisfy me quickly as to your identity. Please show me vouchers as to your relationship to Hiram Weldon of New York."

"Why, is that required?" asked Sam.

"You say your father is dead?"

"Yes."

"Very well. You are the next of kin, and necessarily the heir."

"Heir!" gasped Sam. "Heir to what?"

"Why, your uncle's estate, of course."

Sam felt a weakness in the knees.

"What, is my uncle——"

"Dead? Yes—three months ago, and he did not leave a will. If you can prove that you are Sam Weldon you are in great luck, I can tell you."

For a time Sam could not speak. He was completely overwhelmed.

His uncle dead, and he heir to a vast fortune. It was too much like a dream to be true.

The impatient little attorney was wholly out of patience.

"Come! Come!" he cried. "My time is valuable."

"What do you want?" asked Sam, suddenly arousing.

"I want you to prove your identity."

"Pshaw! Is that all?" exclaimed Sam. "I'll soon do that."

It was but a few moments' work for him to produce a small casket containing old family documents and records, his parents' certificate of marriage, his own evidence of birth, and other papers, which pretty thoroughly satisfied the man of law.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Weldon," he said finally. "Do you know how large an inheritance is yours?"

"No," replied Sam.

"No," replied Sam.

"Well, to set it low, there is at least a million and a half."

Sam felt giddy with the force of this revelation, it was such a sudden transition from the penniless young fireman of No. 6 to the station of millionaire.

For a time he could not realize it. He fancied it all a dream; but it was a certain reality.

Mr. Ward at once telegraphed his firm in New York, and Sam was informed that in a very few days the property would be made over to him. The young fireman was yet too dazed to fully realize the enormity of his good fortune.

Of course the report spread like wildfire. Everybody in Norton knew in a very short space of time that Sam Weldon had fallen heir to a million.

Congratulations poured in upon Sam at an alarming rate. He accepted them gracefully, however, and after a time began to feel more like himself.

No one seemed more pleased than Hiram Bates. He wrung Sam's hand excitedly, and cried earnestly:

"Now, my boy, you'll not feel obliged to leave Norton. No more running to fires."

"I have no intention of giving up my position on No. 6 yet," replied Sam.

"You'll want to do it in time."

"Perhaps so. I thank you, Mr. Bates, for your kind wishes."

"I mean them, lad. Be sure of that. But do you mind what we were talking of not a week back? You said that if you had the money you'd gladly rebuild the Sinclair Mills."

With an inspiration, Sam cried:

"I'll stick to my word. If I can buy the mill site from Royal Bent, I'll do it."

"Hurrah!" cried Hiram Bates excitedly. "I knew you were true blue, Sam Weldon."

Like wildfire the report flew through the town that Sam Weldon with his newly acquired wealth meditated rebuilding the mills. The rumor created great excitement.

Sam's sudden rise in the world did not by any means affect his personality. He was the same as ever, and his popularity was greater than before.

It was not long before the estate of his uncle was settled up, and then, with the due formalities of law, the inheritance was made over to him.

There was rich, paying property in New York, railroad stocks, bank accounts and interests in Western mines. It all footed up to a comfortable million and a half.

"I suppose, Mr. Weldon, you will come to New York to live now?" said Howes, of the firm of Howes & Hurd.

"No, sir," replied Sam.

"Ah! You do not mean to stay here in this small town?"

"That is just what I mean."

"But it will hardly be field enough for all this capital."

"I think it will be field for all that I shall invest," replied Sam quietly. "This is the town of my adoption."

The young fireman meant every word. He went that day to call upon Royal Bent.

By a stroke of good luck he found the villain at home. Bent showed the effects of a deep debauch, and his speech was thick, and his manner rude.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked, glaring at Sam stupidly.

"I have called to see you upon business," replied the young fireman.

"What is your business?"

"First, let me ask you a question?"

"Well?"

"Do you intend to rebuild the Sinclair Mills?"

Bent gazed insolently at Sam.

"What is that to you?" he asked.

"A great deal. If you do not intend to rebuild, will you sell me the site?"

Bent seemed astounded. He gazed at Sam a moment criti-

cally. He had not heard of the young fireman's good fortune as yet.

"You buy the site?" he exclaimed, with a sneer. "Where is your money?"

"As long as you get your price, that is all you can care for," replied Sam.

"Are you joking me?"

"I am in dead earnest," replied Sam.

Bent looked incredulous. He grinned sardonically, and said:

"Humph! You haven't got money enough to buy it. Ten thousand dollars in cash will buy it, and nothing less."

It was evident that the villain expected that this would squelch the young fireman. To his surprise Sam replied quietly:

"Make out a receipt for me for ten thousand dollars."

Still fancying that Sam was playing a bluff game, Bent took a pen from the table. Sam wrote out a check and laid it down. Then he picked up the receipt written by Bent.

Astounded, Bent picked up the check. It was drawn on a prominent New York bank. In that instant it flashed upon him that Sam was, after all, in earnest. Throwing down the check, he cried excitedly:

"I have decided not to sell the mill site for that sum."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VILLAIN CORNERED.

Sam had shrewdly foreseen this exigency. He knew well the arbitrary nature of the villain, and that it would be like him to refuse to sell the site should he suspect that the mills were likely to be rebuilt.

There is no doubt that Sam would have failed in his project had he not employed strategy.

As it was he only smiled and picked up his hat.

"Good-day, Mr. Bent. You asked a good price for the mill site; but I have paid you for it."

"Never!" cried Bent, wildly. "I tell you I won't sell."

"Of course you won't; for it is mine."

"That is a lie. I have received no pay," roared the villain.

"Hold!" cried Sam, holding up the receipt. "Here is your signature to this, which is a literal bill of sale. Received payment by check. You cannot evade that, Royal Bent."

The villain's eyes for a moment gleamed with baffled hate and fury. Then a sinister glare superseded this and he gritted mockingly:

"I will swear that this is a forgery. If you want to rebuild the mills in this town, Sam Weldon, you may find a site for yourself. I can tell you that you cannot have mine."

Sam's patience was exhausted. He placed the receipt in his pocket and walked straight up to the arbitrary scoundrel.

"You unmitigated villain!" he ejaculated, forcibly, thrusting a clenched fist under the wretch's nose. "You have played from the first a murderous, cowardly game. I know you, heart and core. You were the cause of Morton Sinclair's death. You seek the utter ruin of everybody and everything with which you come in contact. You are an enemy to all mankind, a lying, sneaking, thieving, murderous villain. But I bid you beware. There is a time of defeat for you close at hand which you cannot overcome. You are on the rapid road to perdition."

The wretch fairly cowered beneath Sam's righteous wrath.

"You did not dream that I had sufficient money to buy the mill site," continued the young fireman, scathingly. "But I have to say to you that the goddess of Fortune has smiled upon me of late. I am the fortunate heir to a million and a half, and I can hound you to the gallows if I see fit. Nobody

knows your circumstances better than I. I know that you have miserably squandered Morton Sinclair's fortune, that you have nothing left but this mill site, which you have just sold to me. Now, take your money for it, and leave Norton. You have run your career here. The air will stifle you if you stay here longer. I will not answer to public opinion for your life. Take my advice, cash that check, and never blacken this town with your obnoxious presence again."

Every word uttered by Sam was to the point, and a telling shot. The truth laid down in this manner to the villain was too plain and palpable for him to overrule.

With a sullen curse he picked up the check.

"Well," he gritted, "I made you pay well for it, anyway."

"I paid you your price, which admits of no equivocation," replied Sam. "My lawyer will call to-morrow for the deeds."

Bent sat for a moment with working features, which betrayed the baffled schemes working in his mind.

With sudden inspiration he cried:

"You're a lucky dog, Sam Weldon. So you're going to rebuild the mills, eh?"

"That is my purpose."

"Let me give you a pointer."

"Well?"

"They won't stand long."

There was a significance in the villain's words which gave a thorough understanding of his meaning.

"They will stand long enough to entrap the incendiaries who may try to fire them," the young fireman retorted, fiercely. "That is a fair warning for you, Royal Bent."

"For me?" gasped Bent. "What do you mean?"

"I need not particularize further."

"Do you dare to accuse me of incendiarism?" fumed the villain.

"Of complicity with incendiaries—yes."

Sam met Bent's gaze coolly, quietly and penetratingly. The villain knew that he was in the hands of a master power.

"You are the devil and all," he gritted. "You have got the best of the situation, I will admit—just now."

"I intend to have the very best of it to the very end," replied Sam, coolly. "Come, Royal Bent, let us have an understanding."

"Eh?"

"I know you through and through. It is possible for me to place you on the gallows, if I see fit. Easy; do not attempt a bluff game. It will not work. In a very short while you will be desperately in need of money."

"Ah! then you want to secure my services for some little scheme?" asked Bent, with a sneer.

"In a certain measure—yes. I will pay you quite a large sum of money if you will agree to restore Agnes Bates, alive and well to her parents."

The villain for a moment was silent. Then his features relaxed into a sinister, almost devilish smile.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, with a fiendish glee. "There is the place where I can tightly squeeze you. I understand it well, my friend. I have never admitted that I know anything of Agnes Bates' disappearance."

"That is not material," said Sam, earnestly. "I want to know if you will make terms."

"If I really knew where the girl was," said Bent, guardedly, "there is not money enough under the sun to induce me to give her up to you. She should be mine forever. We will drop the subject, if you please."

Sam saw that it was no use to try to compromise with the villain. He accepted the advice to drop the subject.

"Then our business for to-day is terminated," he said, moving toward the door. "I will bid you good-day."

The door closed behind him. For a moment after his departure, Royal Bent stood in the center of the room, with a

mixture of deadly passion blended in his evil face most frightful to see.

He gripped the corner of the table for support, so fierce were his emotions.

"Curses on that young fiend!" he gritted, savagely. "He has ruined me, and he is not yet done with me. I can see it in his eye. He will carry out his threat and see me on the scaffold. I can see the walls of the ruin tumbling about me. And yet only a few days ago victory was mine. Ah, I begin to see that I have been a fool."

He went to a shelf near and took down a decanter of wine.

He poured out a liberal drink.

"It will steady my nerves," he said. "Here is defeat to my enemies."

He drained the glass, and then sank into a seat.

The fumes of the wine stimulated his fuddled brain. He clinched his hands with a sudden spasm, and gritted:

"Ah! I have been a fool; but we shall see. The end is not yet. Let him rebuild the mills, if he dare. Ha, ha, ha! that will be the proper way to win the sweet revenge! Reduce his hopes to ashes! ruin him in return! Ha, ha! revenge is sweet, and it shall be mine."

He sat for some time in a deep spell of study.

Then he arose and staggered out onto a balcony. Steps led down to the lawn, and he went down them, and walked through the shrubbery.

A summer house was near, and he entered it. He was still buried in thought, and this was quite likely why he did not hear a footstep in his rear.

A heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder; he turned instantly.

"Bud Ross!" he exclaimed, and all the color left his face.

The villainous incendiary, the revengeful Corsican, and the man he dreaded, stood before him.

CHAPTER XX.

A RASCALLY CONFAB.

For a moment the two arch villains stood facing each other without deigning to speak. It was a tableau.

Gradually a glitter of deadly hatred and vengefulness began to emanate from the inflamed eyes of Royal Bent.

He remembered in that moment that Ross was the man who had executed upon him a vow of vengeance, had fired the mills, and reduced him to his present straightened circumstances.

This was quite sufficient to arouse all the rancor of Bent's nature. He had no pleasant greeting for his former pal and associate in crime.

To the contrary Ross was the personification of politeness and pleasantry. He smiled and extended his hand with a degree of friendliness.

"Give us your hand, pardner. Mighty glad to see ye. It makes me think of old times."

But Bent recoiled as if from a serpent. His eyes glittered savagely as he exclaimed:

"What! Dare you ask me to shake hands with you?"

Ross affected surprise.

"What's wrong, pard?" he cried. "We used to be friends."

"Used to be," sneered Bent. "That is well said."

"Come, Royal," said Ross, with a freedom which irritated Bent. "What's the use for us to play fool? We cannot afford to work at cross purposes. I'll forgive you for your unfair treatment of me, if you'll forgive me."

A hiss like the warning of a serpent escaped Bent's lips.

"You talk of forgiveness," he gritted. "You, who did me the

greatest wrong of my life! You, who set fire to my mills out of pure spite, and tried to ruin me!"

"Easy," rejoined Ross. "You must not forget your treatment of me."

"I treated you well."

"I should like to differ with you."

"Well, in what manner did I ill-treat you?"

"Did I not place this fortune in your way, and did you not refuse to pay me for it?"

"No."

"What?"

"I offered to pay you well, and much more than was your share."

The two villains glared at each other.

"I will admit," said Ross, "that I have been sorry since that I did not take your settlement."

"It is too late to be sorry now," sneered Bent.

"I also regret any misunderstanding between us. It has hurt us both."

"I thought you had gone abroad. What are you doing here?"

"Abroad?" ejaculated Ross. "How on earth could I go abroad without money? I was penniless when I left here."

"There was no need of that."

"I admit it. Hang it, man, be reasonable. I have made conciliatory advances and you ought to do the same."

"Conciliation is not in my disposition," said Bent, savagely. "You went back on me, Bud Ross, and I shall never forgive you. I hate you with all my soul."

Bent spoke with force, and vindictively. But Ross only laughed.

"That's all right, Royal," he said, coolly. "You'll soon cool down. In fact, I propose to show to you that it is to your interest to make up with me."

The sang-froid of the senior villain staggered Bent. For the moment he was silent.

"I must say, Budd Ross," he said, coolly, "that you have got the steadiest nerve and the greatest amount of assurance of any man I ever knew."

"I am proud of those attributes," declared the villain, with a smile.

"You ought to be."

"But enough. We are wasting time. Do you propose to make terms with me?"

"What are your terms?"

"We will resume partnership."

"That is well, after my former experience with you," sneered Bent. "I prefer a partner I can trust."

"Oh, you have rode the high horse long enough, Royal," cried Ross, impatiently. "I can tell you that nobody knows your circumstances better than I do."

"Is that so?"

"It is just so. I know that you are a bankrupt, that in less than six months you'll be in the gutter, so to speak. You will be glad enough of my friendship."

"To whom do I owe my misfortune?" asked Bent.

"Well, allow that I am responsible for it. Stop and think. Isn't it evidence enough of my good will that I should offer to stand in with you and help you out of the hole?"

"In what manner do you propose to do that?"

"Well, we will see in course of time. I hear that your rival and enemy, the young fireman, Sam Weldon, has come into a fortune."

Ross spoke with significance which did not escape Bent. The latter's face brightened. In that instant he saw the unquestionable policy of effecting a reconciliation.

There was no doubt but that Ross would be the best ally he could have in his new machinations against Sam Weldon.

Royal Bent was a deep and crafty villain. Where personal ends were to be subserved he could easily be counted in.

But Budd Ross was an equally deep schemer. He saw at once that he had clinched the nail, and took advantage of his point quickly enough.

"Yes," replied Bent, guardedly. "He has inherited a fortune."

"A pretty large one, too."

"He says a million and a half."

"I don't doubt it. I have also heard that he meditates emulating Morton Sinclair and building new mills in Norton."

"That is true."

The two villains gazed at each other.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Ross, coolly. "Have you any vendetta?"

"I have a powerful motive for revenge," declared Bent, savagely. "And I mean to gratify it. Let the young fool rebuild the mills, if he dares do it."

A sardonic smile wreathed Ross' lips.

"I understand," he said, coolly. "Well, I am with you, Royal. We will work together, eh?"

Bent turned with a sudden impulse.

"Do you mean business, Budd Ross?"

"Of course I do."

"And we will agree to stick together through thick and thin?"

"Yes."

"And this time it will be understood that we mutually agree to divide the spoils?"

"Now you are talking business!" cried Ross, triumphantly. "We will succeed."

"But have you any plan whereby we can trick that young cub out of his rich inheritance?"

"Not just at present. But we shall find one. Meanwhile we must spoil his little game of re-establishing the mills."

"That is the idea!" cried Bent, with fiendish delight, "Ross, bygones are bygones."

"Yes."

"And from this moment we are partners forever."

"I agree to it."

"That settles it. By hook or by crook we'll down that young fireman and get his little million and a half. It shall be ours. Let us get to work at once."

"Wait a moment," said Ross. "What have you done with that girl?"

"You mean Agnes Bates?"

"Yes."

"She is in my power, and, at this moment, in this very house. By the way, Ross, I want your help. I want to have a forced marriage, and you must help me. See?"

Ross shrugged his shoulders. But Bent clutched his arm and cried:

"Come with me and we will go in and see her. She is a prize well worth the winning."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE GIRL CAPTIVE.

Ross was secretly averse to any scheme which concerned a woman. Upon this point he was slightly superstitious.

"I never saw any luck in it yet," he once declared. "If there's anything in the world brings a man to grief, you'll find there's a woman at the bottom of it."

But under the circumstances he could not refuse Bent's requests. Therefore he reluctantly followed him.

It was a singular thing that Sam Weldon in his disguise as a servant had been for some days in this house, and had been unable to discover any trace of the captive girl.

That she was confined in Bent's house was a certain fact. But surely a cleverer place of concealment was never devised by human mind.

Bent led the way to an upper story. There was a deserted wing to the house, and into this he led his companion.

Ross followed slowly, and as they entered a narrow corridor Bent suddenly touched a secret knob. There was a slight jog in the wall here, and, to Ross' surprise, the entire section swung outward, leaving a wide doorway or entrance to a chamber, the existence of which would have escaped the observation of the most thorough searcher.

Sam had examined carefully every chamber in this wing while in his capacity as butler, but had failed to find any indications of the presence of a secret chamber here.

As the section of the wall swung back, Bud Ross saw a medium-sized chamber, well furnished. A lamp burned upon a small center table, and illumined the place.

A small fire blazed upon a hearth. Before this in an easy chair, sat a young girl, with pallid, but beautiful features. It was Agnes Bates.

The two villains entered the secret chamber, and Bent, touching a spring, the wall slid back into place.

At their entrance Agnes, with flashing eyes, sprang to her feet.

She had been many weeks a prisoner here, and her captivity had worn much upon her physical being. She was extremely pale and thin.

Ross glanced at her covertly, and then averted his face.

"By Jupiter!" he exclaimed. "Is this one of your inventions, Royal? It makes a man think of olden times and fairy tales."

"It is Bud!" cried Bent, in a self-satisfied manner. "Oh, I tell you, I'm a shrewd schemer. Detectives have ransacked this house without discovering this secret."

"Well, it beats me," muttered the senior villain.

Agnes had retreated to the furthest end of the room.

Bent advanced toward her with a sycophant smile. Rubbing his hands he bowed and scraped with mock civility.

"Well, my lady," he exclaimed, in a mocking voice. "I hope we find you in good spirits to-day."

Agnes did not reply.

"Ah, dumb as usual, eh?" continued the villain. "Well, I shall take that as a good sign. I have no doubt you will soon come to my terms."

"Sir!" said Agnes, with spirit. "If there is such a thing as a spark of manhood in your composition, you will set me at liberty without delay."

Ross gave a start, and glanced keenly at the young girl. The villain could not help but admire her brave spirit.

But Bent's face clouded.

"Ah, defiant as usual," he gritted. "Very well, we will soon tame you, my fine dove. Of course you realize how utterly you are in my power."

"I realize that you are the prince of scoundrels," retorted Agnes.

"Easy! Don't insult me."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Ross. "She is more than a match for you, Royal. She is a little tigress."

"All right," said Bent, savagely. "She shall tremble before I am done with her. I want an answer from you, my lady. Are you going to yield to my terms or not?"

Agnes' eyes flashed.

"I will die first," she replied.

"Now listen to reason," said Bent, imploringly. "Don't be foolish, Agnes. I love you, and so desperately that I have dared everything, even your hatred, to win you."

The young girl's lips curled contemptuously.

"I will promise you anything," continued the villain. "You

shall have the luxuries of a queen. This house shall be yours if you will only promise to marry me."

There was a pause. For a moment Agnes was silent, then she made reply:

"I have given you my answer; I will die first."

Bent's eyes gleamed evilly.

"You really mean that?" he asked.

"I do."

"Then listen. You scorn my love. I will tell you that I have sworn to make you mine, and mine you shall be. If you will not willingly wed me you shall do it against your will."

"You cannot force me to do that which I will not," replied Agnes, firmly.

"Do you think so?" gritted Bent. "We shall see. To-morrow at this hour I shall be here with a minister of the gospel. You shall marry me even against your will."

"Ah, no minister of the gospel will consent to make such a marriage," cried Agnes, triumphantly.

"There is one who is in my power, and will not dare to refuse."

Bent turned and touched the secret knob. The section of wall again opened and he passed out with Ross.

But he paused in the entrance way to say:

"You see, ma cherre, how useless it is for you to rebel. I am master, and you are to choose whether you will become slave or queen. Au revoir."

The section of the wall slid into place. Bent led the way down the stairs and into the library.

"Well," he said, turning to Ross, "what do you think of her?"

"She is very pretty," replied the senior villain, languidly. "But females are dangerous as dynamite. Excuse me."

"Ordinarily I would agree with you," said Bent. "But this girl has maddened me with her beauty."

He went to a sideboard and took down some bottles of wine. The day had waned and darkness was coming on.

"Of course you'll be my guest for a time," said Bent, cordially, as he filled a glass. "Make yourself at home, Bud. Here's to good luck."

Ross needed no second bidding. And thus together, over the wine bottles, the two arch schemers sat up till far into the night, debating plans for the future, while the pall of a dark tragedy was enwrapping itself about them.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE YOUNG MAGNATE OF NORTON.

When Sam Weldon left Royal Bent's house that afternoon with the bill of sale of the mill site in his possession, he was in an extremely jubilant frame of mind.

The world never looked so bright and joyous to him before. Life seemed well worth the living, and his bosom was thrilled with happy plans.

Norton was the town of his adoption. He had learned to love its pretty streets, its charming location, and the people were of his kind.

In one brief month he was to be transformed from the poor, penniless fireman of No. 6 to the magnate of the place.

For to rebuild and own the once prosperous mills was to wield the power of Norton. He would do it, he would stand by Norton to the last.

As he came to a street corner he met a number of the business men of the place.

They were gathered in a knot, and as he approached one of them, whom we will call Mr. Woods, addressed him.

"Sam Weldon, you are just the man we want to see."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the young fireman, with a pleasant smile. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"This is Mr. Bates and Mr. Ward," said the merchant, by way of introduction. "Now, Sam, we have been discussing the state of affairs in Norton."

"Indeed!" said Sam quietly.

"Of course you cannot be blind to the fact that Norton is sliding down hill pretty fast. If matters keep on as they have we will soon be obliged to record a great many failures."

"I am aware of that," replied Sam. "It is most deplorable."

"Of course you as well as the rest of us know the cause of all this financial depression."

"I think I do."

"The loss of the mills has night proved the ruin of Norton."

"That is surely so."

"Now, a committee has waited on Mr. Bent, and we are well satisfied that he does not mean to rebuild the mills; in fact, that he has no intention at all in common with Norton or its people."

"I think you are right," replied Sam.

"In this case we now find that a desperate move is necessary to be made. We have held a council to decide upon some wise move. Don't you want to become one of us?"

"I shall be most happy," replied Sam.

"Good! You will never be sorry."

"What is the result of your consultation?" asked the young fireman. "What do you think is best to be done?"

"Well," replied Merchant Woods, slowly, "the one remedy we have hit upon is to rebuild the Sinclair Mills."

"That is a sure remedy," agreed Sam.

"But we have encountered difficulties. The principal one is lack of funds. Of course we are business men, but the most of us have our capital invested in our stock in trade. Yet we propose to organize a stock company, duly incorporate it, and sell the shares. In this way we hope to raise enough ready money to at least partially rebuild and set the business going once more."

Sam experienced strange sensations. He gazed at the anxious, earnest men before him. They were all reputable men of family, with their worldly goods all wholly identified with Norton. If the town went down it meant ruin to them.

Sam's sympathetic nature was touched. He was proud to be one of these conscientious, honorable men of business, the bone of the country, the sinew of its honor and progress.

"Gentlemen," he said, with feeling, "your plan reflects credit upon you."

A gratified flush mantled the face of Merchant Woods.

"We felt sure that you were with us, Sam, and we are proud to welcome you," he declared. "Of course you will subscribe for some of our stock?"

"I will do all in my power," said the young fireman, evasively. "But, gentlemen, it is but a step to the ruined site of the mills. Let us go down there and discuss the plan more fully."

The others readily acquiesced. With brightened faces they accompanied Sam through several side streets to the river-side.

Here the ruins of the deplorable fire were visible.

Sam mounted a pile of bricks and swept the place with a comprehensive glance.

"These were large mills. It is a pity they were destroyed. It will require an immense capital to rebuild them."

The others were silent.

"Again, the purchase price of the site itself would be twenty thousand dollars or more. How much would it cost to put the mills with the machinery back to just where they were before?"

"Well," said Mr. Bates, a shrewd mathematician, "I should

say that half a million dollars, at least, would be required to do it in shape."

"Half a million dollars?"

Silence reigned for a moment.

"That is a great deal of money."

"It can never be raised in Norton," declared Mr. Woods, with a sigh. "Not one fourth of that sum."

"Do you mean that?" asked Sam.

"I think I am right."

"Then how do you expect to rebuild the mills?"

"Ah," replied the merchant, "my plan was to raise fifty thousand dollars on the stock and build a small part of the original mill; as the business increased, enlarge the capacity until the original site is covered."

"That plan is all right," agreed Sam. "But do you know how long it would take to do that?"

"A good while."

"It would never be done in our day."

"Well," said the merchant, desperately, "something has to be done. That move is better than nothing."

"Admitted," said Sam. "But did you stop to think that Mr. Royal Bent is opposed to the rebuilding of the mills, and might refuse to sell the site?"

"He ought to give it," exploded Bates.

"Very true; but that would not be characteristic of him. Now, gentleman, we have considered the serious obstacles of this matter. Would you not rather see a single man with the necessary capital step up and shoulder the responsibility of rebuilding the mills?"

"Certainly," they chorused; "but where can we find such a man?"

"Right here," replied Sam, firmly.

The merchants were stupefied. For a moment they gazed at Sam blankly; then Woods said:

"Do you mean that, Sam Weldon?"

"Every word of it," replied Sam, firmly. "Within one year I shall have the Sinclair Mills running again full blast. If it takes a million dollars in cash to do it, they shall be put back right where they were."

"But the site——?" began Woods.

"Is mine," declared Sam, firmly. "I have the receipt of Mr. Royal Bent for thirty thousand dollars for the same. I own the site of the Sinclair Mills."

The three merchants were not only overjoyed but astounded at this wonderful bit of good news. Woods took off his hat with a cheer.

"Hurrah for the boy fireman!" he cried. "The new magnate of Norton. Sam Weldon, you are a noble fellow. Norton is proud of you."

They would have embraced Sam in the exuberance of their joy, but at that moment a startling thing happened.

There broke upon the air a thrilling sound. It sent the blood coursing through Sam's veins.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

"Fire!"

In an instant off went Sam's coat and he pulled up his sleeves.

"What are you going to do?" cried Woods, in surprise.

"Where are you going?"

"To the fire," replied Sam.

"But surely you will give up your duties as fireman now that you are a millionaire?"

"Gentlemen," replied the brave boy fireman, in a ringing voice, "the clanging of that bell means that Norton is in danger. As long as I have strength and good, strong limbs I shall not forget that it is my sacred duty to answer that call. I am still on duty, and I shall always be sure to be on hand."

Then away he went like a deer to the scene of action. In

spite of the distance, he was one of the first at the engine house of No. 6.

The boys gave a wild cheer as they saw their young chief once more with them.

All seized hold of the line, and soon the fire-truck was in the street, and all were madly racing to the scene of the fire.

Sam Weldon was once more the hero of the flames, the pet of a cheering crowd, the brave young fireman. Wealth uncounted could never affect his sense of duty or impulse of honor and noble sacrifice.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A DARK TRAGEDY.

Over the wine bottles Bud Ross and Royal Bent chatted until a late hour at the latter's house.

Their discussion touched upon many topics of interest to them. In the ardor of their fresh affiliation they were exceedingly confidential and warm.

Schemes galore were discussed as to the feasibility of effecting the downfall of Sam Weldon.

Time passed rapidly, and the little Swiss clock on the mantel marked the hour of eleven. Ross chanced to glance at it, when Bud cried:

"Oh, you needn't think of leaving, Bud. You're my guest for the night. There's no leaving until morning."

"Easy, pard," replied the Corsican, refilling his wine glass. "How do you suppose I'm going to leave with such fine old Madeira to hold me here. Don't give yourself any uneasiness about that at all."

"That's where you're wise," agreed Bent. "Help yourself and drink deep."

"That I will, and to your health."

The Corsican drained the glass, and then, sinking back in his chair, continued:

"Well, Royal, the only criticism I can make on the way you have managed affairs regards the girl you have in this house as a prisoner."

"Indeed," said Bent, with a start. "You don't think much of the idea?"

"I must say that I don't."

"Well, that, of course is my affair. I prefer to carry on my little intrigue, and so long as it does not expose you to any risk, you cannot find fault."

"I don't know about that. I think it does expose me to risk."

"In what way?"

"Why, the girl's friends are looking for her. They suspect you. I watch the house. At any moment they may spot me and betray me to the police."

"Pshaw! That is nonsense."

"Don't tell me that," said Ross, testily. "I know what I'm talking about."

His tone was irritable and rude. Bent's face flushed angrily. Both had indulged in just enough of the liquor to make them ugly.

"I don't think you do," said Bent, angrily. "You forget yourself, Bud. The girl affair is my business, and you have no right to meddle. That is flat."

The Corsican's eyes flashed in a lurid manner. He showed his white teeth under his black mustache.

"So ho! That's the way you are going to work it, eh?" he gritted. "Well, I can just tell you that if you are going to be a pal of mine you can't do reckless things, and it is a confounded foolish thing to keep that girl locked up here."

This maddened Bent. He regarded this as unlawful interference upon the Corsican's part.

"All right," he flashed forth. "Then the bargain's off. I'll never be a pal of yours. You're too meddlesome. It's none of your business what I do in my own house."

All in an instant the wind had changed. Once more, in the turning of a hand, the two villains were deadly foes. Each distrusted and feared the other. This was not conducive to advantageous co-operation. Ross was white with rage.

"Well, you will break off with me if you don't agree to give that girl up, and have some head about you," he declared.

"I'll never do that," retorted Bent.

"You won't?"

"No."

"That settles it. I wash my hands of you. We're quits."

"I'm satisfied."

"Ye're just what I thought ye were, a lying, sneaking coward," gritted the Corsican, whose temper was inflamed by liquor.

Bent was equally as ugly. He reeled around the end of the table and thrust his fist into Ross' face.

"Curse ye. Don't ye dare to tell me that again. I'll kill ye."

"You're a liar and a coward!"

"Take that back!"

"Never!"

"Take that, then!"

Bent made a savage blow at Ross. It drew blood upon the Corsican's cheek. Both men were maudlin drunk, but they closed in a clumsy struggle.

The fought madly, biting, clawing and striking at each other. So drunk were they that first one was down and then the other. In this manner they struggled until a catastrophe occurred.

In reeling about the room the table was overturned, and an oil lamp upon it fell with a crash upon the carpet. The oil spread over the fabric ignited instantly.

The two men, maudlin drunk, in their struggles did not notice this, and at that moment Ross, smarting with a blow in the face, drew a dangerous knife and struck Bent.

A fearful cry went up from the villain. The knife had fell athwart the jugular vein and it was completely severed. The blood gushed from the wound in torrents and Bent sank fainting to the floor.

Ross, reeling back, yelled fiercely.

"There, curse ye! That's the time we squared accounts! I've killed ye, and it's good enough for ye."

Royal Bent did not answer. The stamp of death was truly upon his face. He lay gasping upon the floor in the throes of an awful death.

At that instant Ross caught sight of the flames mounting upward from the burning lamp. The sight partly sobered him, and he shrieked:

"Fire! Fire! Confound that wine. I've got my head in a trap now. What shall I do? If they come here and find that I've killed Bent they'll hang me. I must skip this place."

In a hunted manner he glared about him. His gaze rested upon a door, and he started for it.

But before he reached it he caught his foot in a rug and fell forward. The fumes of the liquor had muddled his brain so that he was unable to save himself.

He fell heavily and struck his head against the door frame. It was a fearful blow, and deprived him of his senses.

The sounds of the fracas had drawn the servants to the door. One of these now opened the door and saw the dead form of Royal Bent, and the flames gaining terrific headway.

With a shriek of terror the servants fled from the spot. The alarm of fire was instantly given.

Upon the midnight air peeled forth the dread clangor of the fire alarm bell. It was heard and answered.

The world outside little dreamed of the fearful tragedy enacted in Bent's house that fateful night. The burning mansion was to be his funeral pyre.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SAVED FROM THE FLAMES—THE END.

It was not long before Still-Alarm Sam saw the blaze of the conflagration reflected against the sky. Soon they were upon the spot.

A tenement house it was which was all ablaze. For a time it was lively work getting a stream upon the flames, but success finally rewarded the firemen's efforts.

Like beavers they worked to get the fire under control. Sam distinguished himself in many ways and was the hero of the hour.

For hours the battle went on. But in the course of time the last ember was quenched and the building was considered safe to leave.

This was near midnight. Jaded and smoke-begrimed the fire boys limbered up their machines and started for home.

But they had hardly left the scene when a startling sound rang out again upon the air.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

"Fire!"

The startled firemen listened for the number of the box; it came at last. After the hard battle of hours, duty again made an inexorable call upon them.

But they were loyal to a man; duty called, and it was not refused.

Sam Weldon infused new life into the tired fire boys when he seized hold of the rope, and cried:

"Come on, boys of No. 6! We're sure to be on hand!"

A wild cheer burst from their lips, and away they went, up one street and down another. Now they were in sight of the fire.

A gasping cry escaped Sam's lips.

"My God! It's Royal Bent's house!"

Smoke and flames were pouring from the windows, and it was evident that the house was doomed.

As the fire boys were getting a stream upon the flames, Sam felt a touch upon his arm.

One of the servants, white-faced, stood before him.

"Oh, sir, if ye plaze, the masther is in that house. He must 'av' hurt himself, and can't get out."

A curious and thrilling sensation seized Sam Weldon. For a moment he philosophized that the world would be better off rid of the villain.

He guessed the truth that the villain was maudlin drunk. Then his better sense of justice and mercy asserted itself, and he determined to, if possible, rescue the erring wretch.

"Bring up the ladders!" he cried. "Lively, there!"

The high front stoop had collapsed, and the only way to enter the house was through a window in the second story. The ladder was placed against the window ledge and Sam went up it like a monkey.

He plunged fearlessly into the burning house. He was in a room with a door opening into a main corridor. Along this he ran, and, descending the stairs, stumbled over an object on the hall floor.

It moved, and an agonized voice cried:

"Save the girl. It's a blasted shame to let her die! Bud Ross is bad enough, but he can't see that gal burned up alive. I can't find strength enough to get up the stairs. Hey! Who are ye?"

Sam Weldon was petrified with sheer astonishment. He flashed the light of a lantern in the prostrate man's face.

"Bud Ross!" he cried; "you here?"

The villain gave a sharp cry.

"It's fate!" he gasped. "It's you, then, Sam Weldon! Then you're just the one to save the girl. Never mind me. My time's come, anyway. Save her!"

"The girl!" gasped Sam. "What girl? Where is she?"

"Why, the Bates gal. The one that shallow-brained fool of a Bent was so infatuated with. She's in the top story. Turn into the wing—between two rooms! Cut your way in! Go!"

Still-Alarm Sam needed no further bidding. Ever after he believed implicitly that it was something more than an earthly power which led him directly to the spot. Into the wing he went, and began to cut his way through the partition between the two rooms there located.

Suddenly his ax-blade struck a metallic object. There was a whirring sound and a section of the partition swung back.

The secret chamber was revealed. In its center stood a slight female figure. Sam rushed forward.

"Agnes! God be praised!"

"Sam! At last!"

She was in his arms the next moment. But there was little time for explanations. Taking her light form up in his arms Sam fled along the corridor.

It was quick work for Sam to reach the ladder. He descended quickly to the street. The next moment Hiram Bates, delirious with joy, had his beloved daughter in his arms. It was a happy reunion.

It was useless to try to save the mansion. It was consumed like tinder.

A few hours later it was a heap of ruins. From the ashes the charred bodies of Bent and Ross were taken. They had expiated their crimes, and with their tragic removal the atmosphere of Norton was cleared of a dark cloud, which had threatened the ruin of the beautiful little city. There were none to regret their fate. Such is ever the fit end of villainy and duplicity.

With the removal of the disturbing element, Norton once more obtained a new lease of life. The deadly incendiaries were removed forever, and the rebuilding of the Sinclair Mills gave a fresh impetus to the town.

To-day Norton is a flourishing city, and in all the country there is no more popular nor happy man than Mr. Samuel Weldon, the handsome millionaire mill owner, public benefactor and philanthropist.

A beautiful residence stands in a pretty part of the city. It is the happy home of Mr. and Mrs. Sam Weldon, for Agnes Bates became the happy wife of the young hero of Hook and Ladder No. 6.

The love of a fireman's duties will never desert Still-Alarm Sam. To this day the clang of the fire bells thrills his veins, and he often joins the fire boys in the brave fight with the flames.

The fire department of Norton is still its pride, and Still-Alarm Sam's brave deeds are household tales in that smart little city. Honor and respect as well as great popularity upon the boy fireman, though he is now a millionaire, and having arrived at this propitious point in our hero's career, there is no more fitting time to write

[THE END.]

Read "LOST ON THE OCEAN: OR, BEN BLUFF'S LAST VOYAGE," by Cap't Thos. H. Wilson, which will be the next number (205) of "Pluck and Luck."

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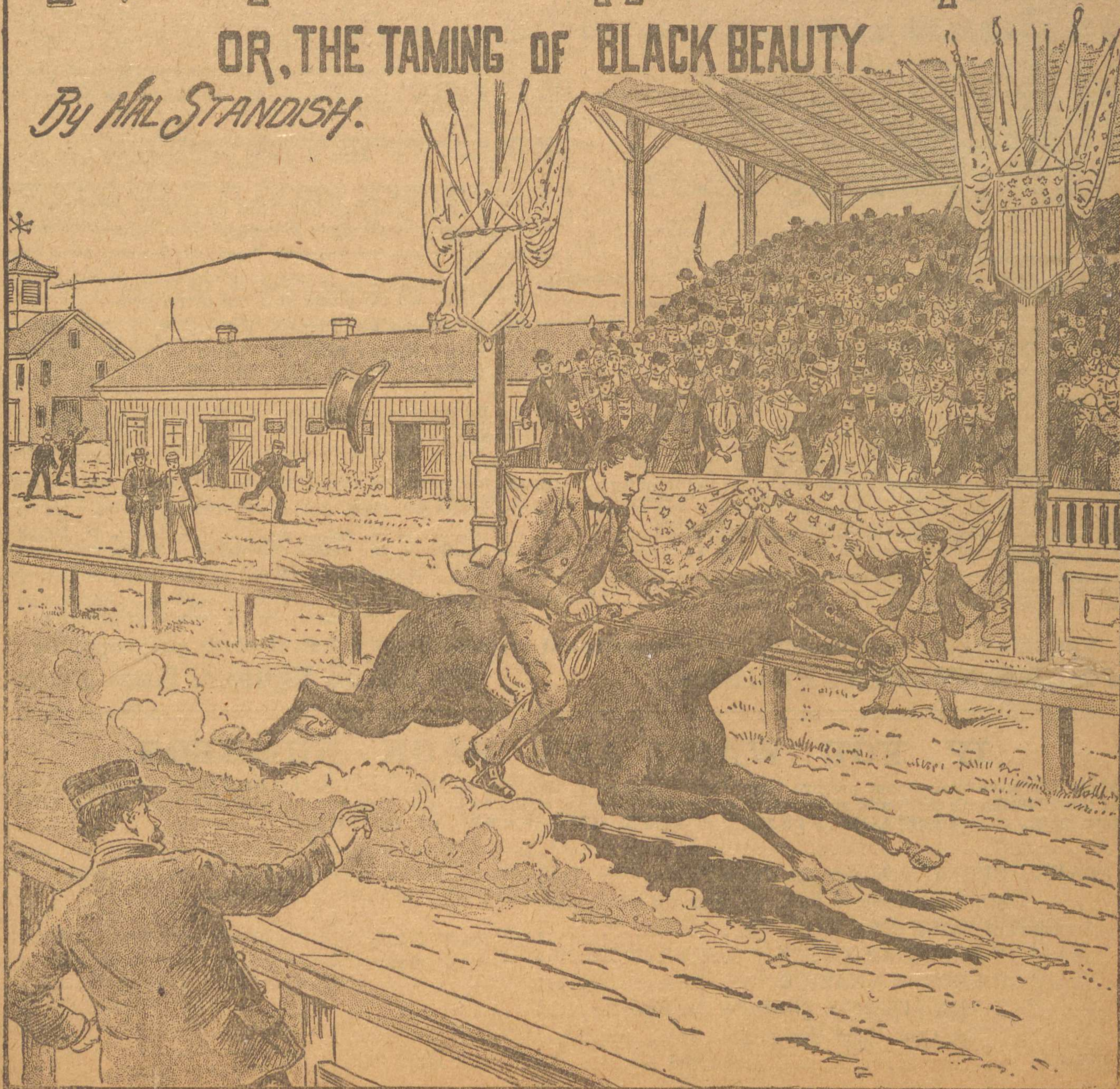
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